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# argosy

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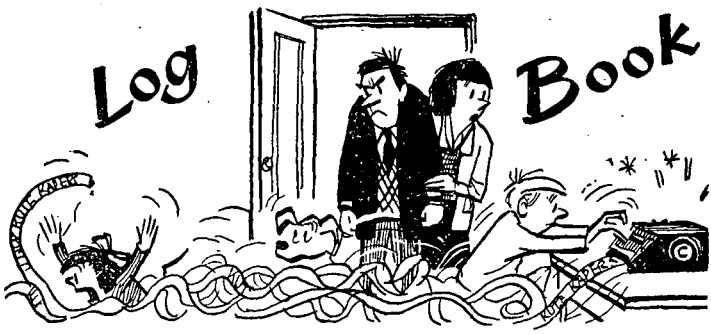


THE NEWS that not long ago the Bishop of Exeter was called in to exorcise a ghost who kept turning on the radio in a house near Newton Abbot, reminds us of our own experiences last summer in a rented house in Rhode Island, U.S.A. Some ghosts trudge round clanking the same old chain year after year, but others, like the Devon spectre, quickly adapt to the benefits of civilisation, and the Rhode Island ghost—we got into the habit of calling it X—must have had an I.Q. up in the 170s, though its tastes in some respects were juvenile.

X had a passion for a TV programme called Li'l Totsie—a sort of Watch with Mom. Every day, rain or shine, regardless of whether we had visitors, an invisible hand would switch on the set and drag up a rocking-chair to within six inches of the screen. We felt sorry for X, who was plainly short-sighted, but, say what you like, there is something demoralising about watching a rocker sway back and forth so close to a sixty-five-inch screen; you are always worrying about the insurance.

Another of X's hobbies was the garage door. The house, of course, was full of mod. con.: self-starting dishwasher, infra-red clothes-airer, which could turn a pair of nylon socks to air in one minute flat, and h., c., and ice-water shower—X loved this too. The garage door was the roll-up kind operated by radio-waves as the car approached. X liked to wait till the car was partway in, and then bring down the door *wham!* on the bonnet or windshield. After a few days of this we took to leaving the car in the street, and X had to content himself with running the door up and down like crazy for ten minutes at a time. The technician, when we got him, said it was the effect of an electrical storm in the neighbourhood, but he didn't know X the way we did.

However there was no doubt that X's favourite toy was the Kitchen Stenographer. This cute little gadget consisted of a

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dial with a lot of theoretical needs printed round it from Angostura to Zippitissues, and a miniature teleprinter with a bit of ticker-tape sticking out. You dialled your requirement and the printer printed it for you on the tape, which you then forgot to take with you when you went to the supermarket. What annoyed us about this gadget was, firstly, that it never seemed to have on the dial the sort of things that we actually needed, like cobbler's thread, or a copy of *The Pickwick Papers*, or pink vegetable colouring-matter to put in the Humming-Bird-Feeder. X adored the Humming-Bird-Feeder, by the way; I'll tell you about that another time.

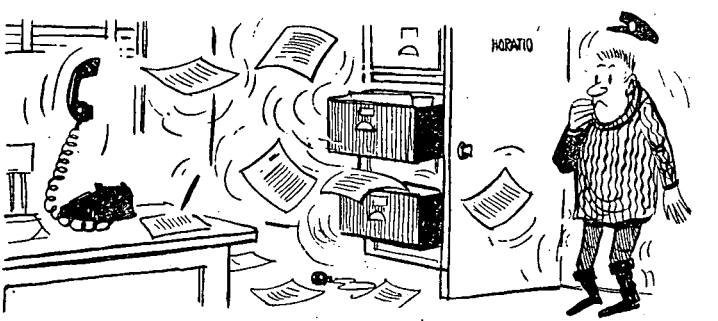
The second thing that annoyed us about the Kitchen Steno was that when X used it—which he did all the time—he seemed to be independent of the dial's list entirely, for he simply printed, over and over, BUY KUTE KAPERS, BUY KUTE KAPERS.

This was an obvious example of the power of advertising, because a Kapers commercial always came on just before Li'l Totsie. We never did buy any Kapers—it was our one means of retaliation against X—and in the end he became quite frantic about it; the kitchen used to be knee-deep in ticker-tape when we came down in the morning.

We left the house with some relief, thinking we had heard the last of X, but would you believe it, that miserable ghost must have taken a fancy to us, for a large Kapers carton, empty, arrived at the Argosy offices last week, mailed from Rhode Island, with ten pounds postage and customs duty to pay.

Since then the filing cabinet drawers have been grinding open and shut by themselves, the phones ring each other up from room to room, and the typewriters work overtime whenever we are absent, rapping out the same maddening message: WHY NOT TWENTY STORIES IN EVERY ISSUE?

JOHN SILVER

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As he put the bus into gear
her smile scorched his heart

# Day in Spring

By
DON STANFORD

THE GIRL got on when every seat on the bus was already taken and there were six or seven men and two women standing. The first big raindrops were just beginning to spatter between the sweeping wipers when Angus MacIver nosed the bus in as close to the kerb as he could and touched the handle, and the doors hissed open and in came the fresh smell of rain and moist earth and spring, and then the girl.

She came skipping from the shelter of the drugstore awning, where a U.S. Marine in dress blues turned away wiping a tiny smear of lipstick from his cheek, and such was the effect of her quickened breath and parted lips and shining eyes and the delicate flush on the cream of her cheek that five men rose as one to offer their seats, oblivious to the baleful stares of the women already standing. Only a very few crystal raindrops sparkled on the pale blue of her new spring suit with the froth of white at the throat; none at all showed on the confection she called a hat, or on the shining silken legs.

Angus MacIver twice dropped her money for her fare, and finally managed to give her change with shaking hands. Her smile scorched his face as he put the bus into gear, and a burst of rain drove hard against the windscreen and a searing hatred rose in him for the man whose front seat just across the aisle she was now graciously accepting with that same smile, but he could not very well offer his own.

And then in a fragmented instant a ball bounced into the glistening rain-wet street ahead of the blurred windscreen, and MacIver hit his airbrakes and a small boy in a yellow jersey dived heedless under the half-ton wheels and was gone, triumphant; and in the cacophony of startled whoops and small screams and stumblings and bumpings from his passengers thrown off-balance, Angus MacIver half turned and neatly fielded the girl in the blue suit as she toppled towards him.

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The force of her fall brought her half lying across MacIver's lap in the protective circle of his arms, and she was all fresh warmth and softness and a fragrance transcending that of spring, and for the one startled moment he would treasure for ever out of all time, she clutched him hard and clung to him as sanctuary. And then someone snickered and laughter welled through the bus and she gasped, the colour rising rich on her fine cheekbones, and she beat ineffectually at MacIver's broad chest with small white-gloved hands and wriggled and was gone, slipping hurriedly into the seat across the aisle, while Angus MacIver, breathing like a man who has run an uphill mile, let in his clutch.

The bus lumbered on, and the rain sluiced down, and the wipers swept clear their arcs and swept again, and the doors hissed open and shut again at Riverside and Overbrook and Devon, and now there were no standees left, and a scattering of vacant seats at the back. Angus MacIver's heart stopped each time the bus stopped, and only started again when the corner of his eye told him she was still there, sitting primly erect with her white-gloved hands clasped on her slim knees and her blue gaze directed demurely forward, making no move yet to get up and depart from his life. But each time the doors hissed open and the fresh smell of spring rain breezed into the bus there were fewer stops to go, and his agony deepened, and still he could think of nothing to say, nothing to do.

And then came Laurelvale. As the bus slewed in towards the kerb she was on her feet, and MacIver's heart plummeted and his hand froze on the doorhandle and the girl stopped, waiting patiently for the doors to open. No one else moved; no one else was getting off here. *And neither*—the vow came unbidden from the heart of Angus MacIver—*was she* . . . The wipers swept and clicked and swept again, and the rain drummed on the bus roof and bounced in little silvery fountains from the glistening black asphalt of the street. The girl turned her head curiously, and Angus MacIver found his voice.

"You live far?" he inquired in a desperate croak.

A delicate eyebrow arched and the girl answered faintly, bewildered, "No, not far. In River Park. Please, can I—?"

"Why, that's a mile, pretty near!" Angus MacIver cried, and without his conscious volition his hand moved from doorhandle to gear lever and his foot eased off the clutch. "And it's raining, you'd be soaked to the skin! Sit down, miss, I'll take you home!"

Back in the bus someone snickered and someone gasped, and the snicker died and the gasp spread into little muffled

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cries of alarm and disbelief and consternation as MacIver swung his cumbersome vehicle gradually off its route into a wide left turn and trundled majestically down towards the River Park district. The girl tottered, thrown off-balance by the turn, and slipped hastily back into her seat to regain balance and composure.

She said, in a faint bleat of protest, "But you can't—I mean, really, you needn't— "

Her small voice was lost in the swelling babble that filled the bus, the incredulous half-frightened outcries of regimented human beings weaned on the security of routine and outraged by any deviation from norm or schedule, and then above the confused babble rose one authoritative male voice, pompous and at the same time querulous, demanding.

"Driver, what do you think you're doing? You can't take this bus off its route, you have no right . . . *Are you drunk?* Driver, have you been drinking? I believe this man is drunk, and I'll see that he's . . . I'm going to get to the bottom of . . ."

There was a very small brief scuffling sound, and the querulous voice stopped, and a younger male voice said cheerfully and clearly, "You're going to get your bottom right back on to that seat, that's what you're going to do, Pop, and keep your mouth shut. So it's a mile out of the way, that's ten minutes; you can spare ten minutes. We can all spare ten minutes. And the guy's not drunk; didn't you see his face when she fell in his lap? It's something bigger than booze that's hit him. What goes on, like, in the spring, huh? "

Somebody giggled, and a woman's voice said with bright satisfaction, "Love."

"It's right here," the girl said in a strained and muffled voice, her breath stirring MacIver's ear, her fragrance in his nostrils choking him, "the white one, with black shutters. Th-thank you, and . . ."

The bus stopped and the doors hissed open, but Angus MacIver was on the ground before her, handing her down from the high step possessively, and in that instant the rain stopped as spring rains do, abruptly and completely.

MacIver turned and tucked her small white-gloved hand firmly into the crook of his arm and escorted her unhurriedly to the door of the white house with black shutters, where he released her reluctantly and she turned to him. Her eyes were wide, but not bewildered; her lips were parted and her breath came fast and light; and the fragrance of her shining hair was dizzying.

"You'll . . . you'll lose your job! " she said, in a voice that tried to be stern and broke on a giggle, and Angus MacIver's

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heart soared at the unspoken words in her eyes, and he grinned and answered confidently, "I've lost nothing; I've spent it. The job was to give me time to think, to know what I was going to be. Now I know, in general terms . . ."

The clear ivory brow furrowed with the unspoken question, and MacIver cleared his throat and said gruffly, "You like Marines, I noticed. I can be a Marine. Tomorrow I'll be a Marine. Anything else you'd rather, why, I can be that, too. What a man needs, before he decides who he's going to be, is to know why. I've just found out. You're why, aren't you?"

The girl glanced away and blushed, and he followed her gaze and saw that the windows of his bus were crowded with faces, most of them grinning. He grinned back, and reached for the girl, but she eluded him.

"Yes, I like Marines," she said hurriedly. "That one you saw happened to be my brother, but I've nothing against them in general. Or bus drivers, either. I've always felt I wouldn't care what my man did, once I found him, but I'm not going to discuss that sort of thing now. And don't you come back before eight o'clock. My father hates people who interrupt his dinner."

"Eight it is, then," MacIver said, and she opened the door and popped inside, and then popped her head out again and grinned at him like a pixie, and said, "Oh, and don't bring the bus tonight. It's kind of conspicuous on a quiet street!"

A quiet street it was, too, and well off the bus route, and no doubt that accounted for the astonishing number of people watching from windows and doorsteps as Angus MacIver drove majestically away with his load of passengers, cheering like kids after a basketball game as the spring sun came out again.

© Don Stanford 1964

## *SEVENTH HEAVEN!*

In Spain, St. Anthony is the marrying saint par excellence, the saint who is appealed to to find everything from lost objects to new sweethearts. When he refuses to comply he is punished. In the village of Forcaray, in Galicia, St. Anthony's statue has to be guarded carefully to defend him from disappointed village girls who put him out in the rain or tie a rope round his neck when he is slow in finding them a novio. When he does find them one, the triumphant novias wind their sweethearts' ties round the saint's neck. One morning he was found draped with no less than seven ties!

NINA EPTON, *Love and the Spanish*

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# *A Batch of* BEETLES

**Beetle-headed, flap-eared knave!**
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Taming of the Shrew*

*Good Mr. Darwin once contended*
*That Beetles were from Bees descended,*
*And as my pictures show I think,*
*The Beet must be the missing link.*
*The sugar-beet and honey-bee*
*Supply the Beetles' pedigree:*
*The family is now complete—*
*The Bee, the Beetle, and the Beet.*
ROBERT WILLIAMS WOOD

## *She loves you . . .*

" — that the Sixth can't protect themselves from bein' kissed when they go for a walk!" cried Beetle, taking up the running with a rush. " Sweet business, isn't it? Cheerful thing to tell the fags, ain't it? We aren't prefects, of course, but we aren't kissed very much. Don't think that sort of thing ever enters our heads; does it, Stalky?"

" Oh *no*!" said Stalky, turning aside to hid his emotions. M'Turk's face merely expressed lofty contempt and a little weariness . . .

The door banged behind their outraged innocence.

" Oh, Beetle! Beetle! Beetle! Golden Beetle!" sobbed Stalky, hurling himself on Beetle's panting bosom as soon as they reached the study. " However did you do it?"

" Dear-r man!" said M'Turk, embracing Beetle's head with both arms, while he swayed it to and fro on the neck in time to this ancient burden—

" *Pretty lips—sweeter than—cherry or plum*
*Always look—jolly and—never look glum;*
*Seem to say—Come away. Kissy!—come, come!*
*Yummy-yum! Yummy-yum! Yummy-yum-yum!*"
RUDYARD KIPLING, *Stalky and Co*

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*the ghosts i have known*
*were the ghosts of persons*
*who were waiting for a vacant*
*body to get into*
*they knew they were going*
*to transmigrate into the bodies of*
*lizards lice bats snakes*
*worms beetles mice alley cats*
*turtles snails tadpoles*
*etcetera*
*and while they were waiting*
*they were as cross as all get out*

don marquis, *archy and mehitabel*

" Lord knows, they wasn't very welcome, pore little innercents; but now they *are* 'ere, we may as well bring them up right. And I will, too. It's to me advantage. Come another four years and I can begin makin' use of them."

" How? " asked Flora, pausing at the door . . .

" Train the four of them up into one of them jazzbands," replied Mrs. Beetle promptly. " I seen in the *News of the People* that they earns as much as six pounds a night playin' up West in night-clubs. Well, I thought, here's a jazzband ready-made to me 'and, as you may say; and it's better still now there's four of them . . . So that's why I'm bringing them up right, on plenty of milk, and seein' they get to bed early. They'll need all their strength if they 'ave to sit up till the cows come 'ome playin' in them night-clubs."

STELLA GIBBONS, *Cold Comfort Farm*

## *Way Out*

*I listened, I opened,*
*I looked to left and right,*
*But nought there was a-stirring*
*In the still dark night.*
*Only the busy beetle*
*Tap-tapping in the wall,*
*Only from the forest,*
*The screech-owl's call.*

WALTER DE LA MARE, *Some One*

## *Not even for the birds*

My lords, we are vertebrate animals, we are mammalia! My learned friend's manner would be intolerable in Almighty God to a black beetle. WILLIAM MAULE, 1858

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The room had been described in the house agent's list as a "convenient breakfast room in basement," and in the daytime it was rather dark. This did not matter so much in the evenings when the gas was alight, but then it was in the evening that the blackbeetles got so sociable, and used to come out of the low cupboards on each side of the fireplace where their homes were, and try to make friends with the children. At least I suppose that was what they wanted, but the children never would.

E. NESBIT, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*

## *Horn solo*

*Now air is hush'd, save where the weak-ey'd bat,*
*With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing,*
*Or where the beetle winds*
*His small but sullen horn . . .*

WILLIAM COLLINS, *Ode to Evening*

In Albania, if the fields or vineyards are ravaged by locusts or beetles, some of the women will assemble with dishevelled hair, catch a few of the insects, and march with them in a funeral procession to a spring or stream, in which they drown the creatures. Then one of the women sings, "O locusts and beetles who have left us bereaved," and the dirge is taken up by all the women in chorus. Thus by celebrating the obsequies of a few locusts and beetles, they hope to bring about the death of them all.

J. G. FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*

*Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,*
*And all the air a solemn stillness holds,*
*Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,*
*And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds.*

THOMAS GRAY, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

Again we all clustered round the Doctor as he carefully lifted off the glass lid and let the big beetle climb out upon his finger.

"Ladybug, Ladybug, fly away home!" crooned Bumpo. "Your house is on fire and your chil—"

"Oh, be quiet!" snapped Polynesia crossly. "Stop insulting him! Don't you suppose he has wits enough to go home without your telling him?"

"I thought perchance he might be of a philandering disposition," said Bumpo humbly. "It could be that he is tired of his home and needs to be encouraged. Shall I sing him 'Home, Sweet Home' think you?"

"No. Then he'd never go back. Your voice needs a rest."

HUGH LOFTING, *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle*

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# argosy's

# Shakespeare Award

## £250 FOR THE BEST ORIGINAL SHORT STORY

CLOSING DATE:
APRIL 30th 1964

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# argosy's Shakespeare Award

**£250 FOR THE BEST ORIGINAL SHORT STORY**

This year, the eyes of the world will be on Stratford where 400 years ago William Shakespeare was born. As we think perhaps of schooldays, courtship, deer-stealing, play writing, acting before Queen Elizabeth or the citizens of London, moving in court circles or roistering in taverns, it is Shakespeare himself that we most want to see, to meet, to get to know. Shakespeare the man, the playwright, the actor, the poet, the father of his children: Shakespeare as friend, or lover, or citizen of Stratford.

**Argosy invites you to create Shakespeare, the man himself, in a short story. Shakespeare—as you see him.**

Choose your own plot; invent, imagine. One possible approach might be that in your story Shakespeare encounters someone, imagined or real, who was the prototype for a character in any of his plays, for instance :—

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, HENRY V,
MACBETH, KING LEAR, TWELFTH NIGHT, HAMLET,
THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR, THE TEMPEST.

Someone whose love, friendship, enmity, chance acquaintance, or what you will, brought the dramatist the first-hand experience from which a character in the plays grew in his mind.

**Step back across the centuries, find and portray in your own terms and in modern language (not imitation Elizabethan, please!) Shakespeare himself, the greatest of our dramatists.**

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**ANTHONY QUAYLE, C.B.E.**
Director, Royal Shakespeare Theatre 1948–1956

**IVOR BROWN, C.B.E.**
Governor, Royal Shakespeare Theatre

**M. ST. CLARE BYRNE, O.B.E.**
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**JOHN NEVILLE**
Theatre Director Nottingham Playhouse

**and the EDITOR of ARGOSY**

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# argosy's
# Shakespeare Award

Argosy's Award of £250 will be made to the writer of the best original short story submitted, portraying Shakespeare. The Award is open to all authors, professional or amateur. Argosy's aim is also to find and encourage new, young, or as yet little-known writers. The Award may be divided if the Judges so advise.

**STORIES** of Argosy calibre *with good plot structure, action, and characterisation* are more likely to appeal to the Judges than slight incidents or episodes. The first-rate story which Argosy readers expect and enjoy is the type of story to win the Award. Young competitors and new writers are advised to look at a recent issue of Argosy.

**LENGTH** is a matter for the writer. A well-told story fixes its own length, but extremes should be avoided. A story of 12,000 words would have to be exceptionally good, and one of, say, only 1,000 words superlatively good, to win the Award. From 3,000 to 6,000 words is perhaps the most practical length.

**ENTRIES** must be submitted on or before April 30th, 1964. The announcement of the Shakespeare Award will be made in the September number of Argosy, published August 7th.

**ALL ENTRIES** to be sent to:

ARGOSY'S SHAKESPEARE AWARD.
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**Again I heard that faint plaintive cry**

# PRISONER of the CORAL DEEP

## by J. G. BALLARD

I FOUND the shell at low tide, lying in a rock-pool near the cave, its huge mother-of-pearl spiral shining through the clear water like a Fabergé gem. During the storm I had taken shelter in the mouth of the cave, watching the grey waves hurl themselves towards me like exhausted saurians, and the shell lay at my feet almost as a token of the sea's regret.

The storm was still rumbling along the cliffs in the distance, and I was wary of leaving the cave. All morning I had been walking along this deserted stretch of the Dorset coast. I had entered a series of enclosed bays from which there were no pathways to the cliffs above. Quarried by the sea, the limestone bluffs were disturbed by continuous rock-slides, and the beaches were littered by huge slabs of pockmarked stone. Almost certainly there would be further falls after the storm. I stepped cautiously from my shelter, peering up at the high cliffs. Even the wheeling gulls crying to each other seemed reluctant to alight on their crumbling cornices.

Below me, the seashell lay in its pool, apparently magnified by the lens of water. It was fully twelve inches long, the corrugated shell radiating into five huge spurs. A fossil gasteropod, which had once basked in the warm Cambrian seas five hundred million years earlier, it had presumably been torn loose by the waves from one of the limestone boulders.

Impressed by its size, I decided to take it home to my wife as a memento of my holiday—needing a complete change of scene after an unprecedentedly busy term at school, I had been packed off to the coast for a week. I stepped into the pool and lifted the shell from the water, and then turned to retrace my steps along the coast.

To my surprise, I was being watched by a solitary figure on the limestone ledge twenty yards behind me, a tall raven-haired woman in a sea-blue gown that reached to her feet. She stood motionlessly among the rock-pools, like a Pre-Raphaelite vision

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of the dark-eyed Madonna of some primitive fisher community, looking down at me with meditative eyes veiled by the drifting spray. Her dark hair, parted in the centre of her low forehead, fell like a shawl to her shoulders and enclosed her calm but somewhat melancholy face.

I stared at her soundlessly, and then made a tentative gesture with the seashell. The ragged cliffs and the steep sea and sky seemed to enclose us with a sense of absolute remoteness, as if the rocky beach and our chance encounter had been transported to the bleak shores of Tierra del Fuego on the far tip of the world's end. Against the damp cliffs her blue robe glowed with an almost spectral vibrancy, matched only by the brilliant pearl of the shell in my hands. I assumed that she lived in an isolated house somewhere above the cliffs—the storm had ended only ten minutes earlier, and there appeared to be no other shelter—and that a hidden pathway ran down among the fissures in the limestone.

I climbed up on to the ledge and walked across to her. I had gone on holiday specifically to escape from other people, but after the storm and my walk along the abandoned coast I was glad to talk to someone. Although she showed no response to my smile, the woman's dark eyes watched me without hostility, as if she were waiting for me to approach her.

At our feet the sea hissed, the waves running like serpents between the rocks.

"The storm certainly came up suddenly," I commented. "I managed to shelter in the cave." I pointed to the cliff top two hundred feet above us. "You must have a magnificent view of the sea. Do you live up there?"

Her white skin was like ancient pearl. "I live by the sea," she said. Her voice had a curiously deep timbre, as if heard under water. She was at least six inches taller than myself, although I am by no means a short man. "You have a beautiful shell," she remarked.

I weighed it in one hand. "Impressive, isn't it? A fossil snail—far older than this limestone, you know. I'll probably give it to my wife, though it should go to the Natural History Museum."

"Why not leave it on the beach where it belongs?" she said. "The sea is its home."

"Not this sea," I rejoined. "The Cambrian oceans where this snail swam vanished millions of years ago." I detached a thread of fucus clinging to one of the spurs and let it fall away on the air. "I'm not sure why, but fossils fascinate me—they're like time capsules; if only one could unwind this spiral it would

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**J. G. Ballard, who might be called a poet of inner space, specialises in exploring the uneasy regions just a step outside our accustomed tramlines.**

**Born in China in 1930, Ballard was interned by the Japanese in World War II, repatriated in 1946. At nineteen he won a Cambridge short-story contest. He has been a copywriter, R.A.F. pilot, and scientific filmscript writer. His first two books came out last year: The Drowned World, a powerful and unusual novel, and The Four-Dimensional Nightmare, a masterly batch of SF stories in which poor Homo Sapiens pioneers the new wilderness he has built himself, among derelict skyscrapers, singing plants, and mechanised Muses in cerise Cadillacs.**

probably play back to us a picture of all the landscapes it's ever seen—the great oceans of the Carboniferous, the warm shallow seas of the Trias . . ."

"Would you like to go back to them?" There was a note of curiosity in her voice, as if my comments had intrigued her. "Would you prefer them to this time?"

"Hardly. I suppose it's just the nostalgia of one's unconscious memory. Perhaps you understand what I mean—the sea is like memory. However lost or forgotten, everything in it exists for ever . . ." Her lips moved in what seemed to be the beginnings of a smile. "Or does the idea seem strange?"

"Not at all."

She watched me pensively. Her robe was woven from some bright thread of blue silver, almost like the hard brilliant scales of pelagic fish.

Her eyes turned to the sea. The tide had begun to come in, and already the pool where I found the shell was covered by the water. The first waves were breaking into the mouth of the cave, and the ledge we stood on would soon be surrounded. I glanced over my shoulder for any signs of the cliff path.

"It's getting stormy again," I said. "The Atlantic is rather bad-tempered and unpredictable—as you'd expect from an ancient sea. Once it was part of a great ocean called—"

"Poseidon."

I turned to look at her.

"You knew?"

"Of course." She regarded me tolerantly. "You're a schoolmaster. So this is what you teach your pupils, to remember the sea and go back to the past?"

I laughed at myself, amused at being caught out by her. "I'm sorry. One of the teacher's occupational hazards is that he can never resist a chance to pass on knowledge."

"Memory and the sea?" She shook her head sagely. "You deal in magic, not knowledge. Tell me about your shell."

The water lifted towards us among the rocks. To my left a

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giant's causeway of toppled pillars led to the safety of the upper beach. I debated whether to leave; the climb up the cliff face, even if the path were well cut, would take at least half an hour, especially if I had to assist my companion. Apparently indifferent to the sea, she watched the waves writhing at our feet, like reptiles in a pit. Around us the great cliffs seemed to sink downwards into the water.

"Perhaps I should let the shell speak for itself," I demurred. My wife was less tolerant of my tendency to bore. I lifted the shell to my ear and listened to the whispering trumpet.

The helix reflected the swishing of the waves, the contours of the shell in some way magnifying the sounds, so that they echoed with the darker murmur of deep water. Around me the breakers fell among the rocks with a rhythmic roar and sigh, but from the shell poured an extraordinary confusion of sounds, and I seemed to be listening not merely to the waves breaking on the shore below me but to an immense ocean lapping all the beaches of the world. I could hear the roar and whistle of giant rollers, shingle singing in the undertow, storms and typhonic winds boiling the sea into a maelstrom. Then abruptly the scene seemed to shift, and I heard the calm measures of a different sea, a steaming shallow lagoon through whose surface vast ferns protruded, where half-submerged leviathans lay like sandbanks under a benign sun . . .

My companion was watching me, her high face lifted to catch the leaping spray. "Did you hear the sea?"

I pressed the shell to my ear. Again I heard the sounds of ancient water, this time of an immense storm in progress, a titanic struggle against the collapsing isthmuses of a sinking continent. I could hear the growling of gigantic saurians, the cries of reptile birds diving from high cliffs on to their prey below, their ungainly wings unshackling as they fell.

Astonished, I squeezed the shell in my hands, feeling the hard calcareous spines as if they might spring open the shell's secret.

The woman still watched me. By some freak of the fading light she appeared to have grown in height, her shoulders almost overtopping my head.

"I . . . can't hear anything," I said uncertainly.

"Listen to it!" she admonished me. "That shell has heard the seas of all time, every wave has left its echo there."

The first foam splashed across my feet, staining the dried straps of my sandals. A narrowing causeway of rocks still led back to the beach. The cave had vanished, its mouth spewing bubbles as the waves briefly receded.

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I pointed to the cliff. "Is there a path? A way down to the sea?"

"To the sea? Of course!" The wind lifted the train of her robe, and I saw her bare feet, seaweed wreathed around her toes. "Now listen to the shell. The sea is waking for you."

I raised the shell with both hands. This time I closed my eyes, and as the sounds of the ancient wind and water echoed in my ears I saw a sudden image of the lonely bay millions of years earlier. High cliffs of white shale reached to the sky, and huge reptiles sidled along the coarse beaches, baying at the grotesque armoured fish which lunged at them from the shallows. Volcanic cones ringed the horizon, their red vents staining the sky.

"What can you hear?" my companion asked me insistently, evidently disappointed. "The sea and the wind?"

"I hear nothing," I said thickly. "Only a whispering."

The noise erupted from the shell's mouth, the harsh bellows of the saurians competing with the sea. Suddenly I heard another sound above this babel, a thin cry that seemed to come from the cave in which I had sheltered. Searching the image in my mind, I could see the cave mouth set into the cliff above the heads of the jostling reptiles.

"Wait!" I waved the woman away, ignoring the waves that sluiced across my feet. As the sea receded, I pressed my ear to the conch, and heard again the faint human cry, a stricken plea for rescue—

"Can you hear the sea now?" The woman reached to take the shell from me.

I held to it tightly and shouted above the waves. "Not *this* sea! My God, I heard a man crying!"

For a moment she hesitated, uncertain what to make of this unexpected remark. "A man? Who, tell me! Give it to me! It was only a drowned sailor!"

Again I snatched the shell away from her. Listening, I could still hear the voice calling, now and then lost in the roar of the reptiles. A sailor, yes, but a mariner from the distant future, marooned millions of years ago in this cave on the edge of a Triassic sea, guarded by this strange naiad of the deep who even now guided me to the waves.

She had moved to the edge of the rock, the strands of her hair shimmering across her face in the wind. With a hand she beckoned me towards her.

For the last time I lifted the shell to my ear, and for the last time heard that faint plaintive cry, lost on the reeling air.

"H-h-e-e-lp!"

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Closing my eyes, I let the image of the ancient shore fill my mind, for a fleeting instant saw a small white face watching from the cave mouth. Whoever he was, had he despaired of returning to his own age, selected a beautiful shell and cast it into the sea below, hoping that one day someone would hear his voice and return to save him?

"Come! It's time to leave!" Although she was a dozen feet from me, her outstretched hands seemed almost to touch mine. The water raced around her robe, swirling it into strange liquid patterns. Her face watched me like that of some monstrous fish.

"No!"

With sudden fury I stepped away from her, then turned and hurled the great shell far out into the deep water beyond her reach. As it vanished into the steep waves I heard a flurry of heavy robes, almost like the beating of leathery wings.

The woman had gone. Quickly I leapt on to the nearest rock of the causeway, slipped into the shallows between two waves and then clambered to safety. Only when I had reached the shelter of the cliffs did I look back.

On the ledge where she had stood a large lizard watched me with empty eyes.

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*THE SHELL*

And then I pressed the shell
Close to my ear
And listened well,
And straightway like a bell
Came low and clear
The slow, sad murmur of the distant seas
Whipped by an icy breeze
Upon a shore
Wind-swept and desolate . . .
And in the hush of waters was the sound
Of pebbles rolling round,
For ever rolling with a hollow sound.
And bubbling sea-weeds as the waters go,
Swish to and fro
Their long, cold tentacles of slimy grey . . .
And then I loosed my ear . . . O, it was sweet
To hear a cart go jolting down the street.

JAMES STEPHENS

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*"Is it murder yet?" asked Henry*

# driving home

## By MARGERY SHARP

HENRY CHEVRON was driving home to London after a day in the country, when he remembered that he had promised to bring his wife a dozen fresh eggs.

He was an architect, and the trip had been one of business, not pleasure—to advise on the conversion of a stately home into a country club; but his client had provided an excellent lunch, and this made Henry all the more anxious to procure Catherine her eggs. For half the ten years of their marriage they had been a very attached couple, and now that their attachment was worn away they clung all the more, in all their dealings with each other, to this sort of playing fair.

Henry dropped to twenty. He wasn't on any popular route, where a stall might neighbour a filling-station, but in the next village a crudely-lettered sign caught his eye, FRESH PRODUCE; so he stopped outside the small brick cottage and sounded his horn. After a few moments a young woman emerged and looked at him impatiently.

"Eggs?" asked Henry.

"Sorry, we haven't got none," snapped the young woman.

Henry asked if she knew where he might be luckier.

"Well, you could try Mrs. Cox. She's at the other end," said the young woman. "If you'll 'scuse me, we're watching the telly."

She turned and immediately went in again. Henry leaned on his horn and shouted for further directions. Of what the young woman called over her shoulder he distinguished only one word, and that an odd one. It sounded like "witch." From a patron of television this seemed unlikely; Henry shrugged and drove on—but slowly, in case Mrs. Cox, witch or no, had a sign out saying EGGS.

At the end of the little street he in fact found what he was looking for—not an egg sign, indeed, but a dwelling slightly larger than the rest with the name Wychwell Cot fading from its

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gate. Henry grinned to himself, stopped again, and got out.

No one answered his ring, but he knew enough of country ways to go round to the back and try there. The garden behind was a mere strip of rough grass terminated by a tall, gappy hedge with apple trees showing above; more importantly, about this apology for a lawn strayed several hens. Henry knocked at the back door and waited.

Again, no one answered. He stepped back a pace or two and looked up for a television aerial. It was there all right, and no doubt Mrs. Cox was there too inside, glued to her set. To put his head through the door and call out seemed the only plan. The

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knob turning easily under his hand, Henry tentatively entered—and at the same moment was himself transfixed by a screech from the rear. Up from the apple orchard an old, old woman came running and screeching her head off.

"What do you want? Who are you? What do you want in my house?" she screamed out.

Henry waited until she was beside him, and moderately explained his errand.

"I can't hear you, I'm deaf!" shouted the woman—and with a strong old hand on his wrist held him firmly where he was. He wouldn't have been surprised if she'd blown a police-whistle. "Who are you?" she repeated furiously. "What's your name?"

There was no reason why Henry should tell her, but he did. It seemed, at the moment, impossible not to. Of course she couldn't hear. She pulled him in, into some sort of scullery, and indicated on the draining-board a paper bag. There was already something scrawled across it: *No bottles out*, read Henry, *so I left none. The Milkman.*

The woman pushed a pencil into his hand. "Go on, write who you are!" she ordered; and Henry obediently wrote his name below—adding the query, *Eggs?*

"Never heard of you!" she shouted. "Don't sell eggs! Go away, go away, go away!"

Henry was only too glad to. Actually, a hundred yards farther on he came to a gate lettered Wychwell Farm, and there bought his dozen fresh eggs without the least difficulty. It slightly disturbed him, he didn't know why, that he'd left his name with Mrs. Cox. (Who, presumably, wasn't Mrs. Cox at all.) He didn't know why, but he wished he hadn't; and to forget the episode all the sooner, said nothing about it to his wife.

He got in about eight, and they dined together as usual in the restaurant attached to the big modern block of flats. Their apartment included a kitchenette, and in the first years of their marriage they often dined there—Catherine cooking while Henry looked on, then both of them washing up to sugary music on the radio; but the habit had lapsed along with many others, and now Catherine used the kitchen only to cook herself a luncheon omelet. It was simpler to eat in the restaurant, also a little conversation with neighbouring diners covered any silence between themselves.

"I shouldn't mind an early night," said Henry, as they finished. "I'm rather tired."

Catherine didn't inquire into his day's events; if she had, he might have inquired into hers; as it was, he didn't notice the omission.

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It was in the next day's evening paper that he saw the paragraph with his own name in it. Otherwise he mightn't have noticed it at all.

It was quite a short paragraph: the old woman of Wychwell Cot, even coshed and robbed, rated no more in the London press. But one's eye notoriously picks out, from any page of print, one's own name; and beneath the headline, MOTORIST MAY AID POLICE, an obviously official release expressed Scotland Yard's desire to interview a Mr. Henry Chevron. In connection, Henry read on, with an attack the previous evening upon Mrs. Selina Louisa Parkin, seventy, of Wychwell Cot, Skrimbles, Oxfordshire.

Absurdly enough, Henry's first thought was that he'd been right about her not being Mrs. Cox. She wasn't: she was Mrs. Parkin.

Of course he put the frivolous point aside at once. He wasn't exactly worried, but he saw the need to clear things up as soon as possible. Actually when he read the paragraph he was already on his way home, by underground, from his office, and there seemed no point in getting out to telephone when he could do so ten minutes later from his own flat. His decision to contact the police was instant, and solid—their investigation of himself being obviously pure routine, necessary if tiresome, and the sooner dealt with the better. Henry Chevron was both a sensible man and a good citizen.

He returned to the paragraph with calm, and from it learnt that Mrs. Parkin had been struck about the head with a blunt instrument and discovered, still unconscious, still clutching an empty handbag, next morning by the milkman. "I suppose no bottles out again," said Henry aloud. His neighbour looked at him curiously; sensible, good citizen as he was, Henry Chevron felt glad to be anonymous. He offered the neighbour an ingratiating smile—and immediately asked himself why. It's more of a shock than one realises, thought Henry—sensibly. I'll telephone as soon as I get in . . .

As it was, he had no need to. The police were there before him.

What was he—the extremely well-mannered, youngish-middle-aged, broad-shouldered, shrewd-eyed visitor? Detective Superintendent, Detective Sergeant, higher in rank or lower? Henry and Catherine never knew. He told them, but they could never remember. To them he was simply the Police; also the Law.

"You've been quick," said Henry Chevron.

It wasn't what he'd have said if he'd thought. But he hadn't time to think. Letting himself in with his latchkey, making

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straight for the telephone in the sitting-room, he hadn't thought even what he'd say to Catherine . . .

The policeman smiled modestly.

" It's an unusual name, sir. Chevron is a very unusual name."

" I was just going to telephone you," said Henry. " I only read about it on my way home; I was just going to telephone you."

" Why do you both say everything twice over? " asked Catherine irritably. " Won't it all take twice as long? "

Henry glanced across at her. She was irritated, possibly nervous; but some marital sixth sense told him she didn't yet know what it was all about.

" Hasn't he told you? " asked Henry—in marital shorthand.

" I've only just got here," interposed the policeman mildly.

" I've only just come in myself," said Catherine. " He was waiting outside. He just asked—"

" You haven't seen an evening paper? " She shook her head.

" Then you'd better know," said Henry, " that an old woman I tried to buy eggs off last night, has been hit over the head. Hence the investigation—initiated, as I remarked before, with commendable speed."

Surprisingly, it was the policeman who thrust a hand under Catherine's elbow. Henry simply felt all his wife's irritation transferred to himself. There was, after all, nothing to faint about . . .

" If I may say so, sir, a little sudden," rebuked the policeman—carefully assisting Catherine to the sofa. But it seemed he wasn't really cross with Henry either; again he smiled his modest smile. " As for speed, I only wish all our jobs were so easy. You left, as you might say, your card; and at Wychwell Farm, where you bought eggs—you did buy eggs there, sir? "

" Certainly," agreed Henry. " One dozen fresh."

" There they fancied you heading for London. So it was really very simple, you being the only Chevron in the directory. And now, sir, if you care to tell me anything you know of Mrs. Parkin, describe your visit to her and so on, besides helping us get the picture, we mayn't need to trouble you further."

" The picture of what? " asked Henry Chevron. " Is it murder yet, or is she still alive? "

The moment after he spoke he knew, again, that it wasn't what he'd have said if he'd thought. Some words are dangerous in themselves. The word murder is so dangerous. But the policeman's regard continued mild.

" Certainly Mrs. Parkin is still alive, sir. They've got a very nice cottage hospital. Only she can't just yet give any evidence. Now, sir, if you're willing to help—? "

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Henry for a moment thought of demanding his solicitor; but such a course was obviously unnecessary, and irritation had made him behave foolishly enough already. He nodded cooperatively, and the policeman nodded pleasantly back.

"When you called on Mrs. Parkin, sir—"

"Wait," said Henry. "I didn't call on Mrs. Parkin at all. Not in the social sense. I didn't know her, I didn't even know her name until I saw it in this evening's paper. I went in—"

"You do admit entering, sir?"

"Naturally. I left my name on a paper bag. No doubt you've got it, it's my writing, any expert would prove it. But I don't like the word 'admit,'" said Henry Chevron. "I'm not 'admitting' anything. I'm—relating."

"It was just a form of speech," apologised the policeman.

"I still don't like it," said Henry loudly. He became aware that Catherine was trying to catch his eye, that she wanted to interrupt, and motioned her angrily to silence. He knew he was losing his temper, and that it was foolish, but her interference wouldn't help him to keep it. With an effort, he continued more blandly.

"Let's say, officer, I agree I entered, as you put it, a house called Wychwell Cot, whose owner I didn't know from Adam, yesterday evening on my way back to town, with the idea of buying eggs. Will that do?"

"According to our information, sir, Mrs. Parkin didn't sell eggs."

Henry controlled himself.

"I mistook the directions given me by a young woman farther down the road. Obviously she directed me to Wychwell Farm; I went to Wychwell Cot. The back door being unlatched, I—entered. Mrs. Parkin—whose identity I did not then know—appeared at the same moment from the orchard. In the course of an extremely tiresome and fruitless conversation, she being deaf as a doorpost, I wrote my name on a paper bag. I then went empty away, leaving the lady, I assure you, uncoshed. I suppose the time—"

"Henry!" cried Catherine.

"Will you, for heaven's sake, leave this to me?" shouted Henry. "The time, officer, being then probably about six fifteen."

The policeman sighed.

"It's a pity, sir."

"What's a pity?" snapped Henry.

"Mrs. Chevron, sir, just told me, just before you came in, you were home last night by six."

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There are moments when the presence of a third party does not in the least inhibit a matrimonial exchange. Henry swung round upon Catherine, his wife, exactly as though they were alone.

"You said I was here? Will you, for heaven's sake, tell me why?"

Catherine straightened her back against the petit-point cushions of the sofa. She'd worked on them for years; the biggest, of her own design, "resumed" their honeymoon at Majorca—purple bougainvillea trellised against a sunny sky. Latterly she'd turned to classic Tudor birds and beasts.

"I thought perhaps you'd been speeding . . ."

"If I had, what a damn fool way to behave!"

"I'm sorry," said Catherine.

"You may well be," retorted Henry furiously. "You've planted me as number one suspect in a possible murder case." He swung back to the policeman almost with relief; man to man. "My wife, officer—and here I'll certainly go on record, I'd like you to take this down—my wife has behaved like an imbecile. All right, I see you think you're on to something. I'd no motive, I don't need the odd pound from an old woman's handbag, but I see that owing to my wife's idiocy you've grounds for suspicion. Is there any other evidence against me?"

The policeman looked shocked.

"If I may say so, sir, you're going much too fast. We're simply collecting information—"

"Then what else have you collected? Perhaps I can help you again," said Henry ironically.

"Well, there was a certain amount of shouting and screaming, sir," said the policeman delicately. "Heard by the next-door neighbours, about the time you say you left. Mrs. Parkin, to be more precise, screaming, 'Go away!'"

Henry laughed—he hoped lightly.

"Certainly Mrs. Parkin was screaming, 'Go away!' At me, because she didn't want to sell me eggs. I imagine she screamed pretty freely. If her neighbours had been in the least alarmed, why didn't they come rushing round?"

"They report they were going to, sir. As you say, the lady did scream out a good deal, which is why they weren't quicker, as one might put it, off the mark. But in this case it was more than usual; they were going to come round—"

"But they didn't," pointed out Henry Chevron.

"No, sir; because it stopped," said the policeman.

With that he thanked Mr. and Mrs. Chevron both; observed that he wouldn't ask for a statement just at the moment; added that Mr. Chevron probably wouldn't be changing his

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address, but that if he did Scotland Yard would appreciate notice; and courteously took his leave.

"Now," said Henry, turning to his wife Catherine, "tell me why you lied."

She sat upright against the cushions, but the colour that had come back to her cheeks slowly ebbed again. It should have been a moment of respite: the policeman, so courteously withdrawing, should have left them to tears and anxious consultation perhaps, but to a momentary respite as well. Catherine and Henry each suspected that they had passed simply from one crisis to another; also that the second might prove the more disastrous. But there was nothing for it now but to go on—or so it seemed to Henry Chevron.

"Now tell me why you lied," repeated Henry Chevron. "You didn't think I was speeding; I don't, and you know it. So why did you tell that lie?"

Catherine moistened her lips. They weren't pale, because she used a very good lipstick; only the bordering flesh was too white.

"He asked what time you got in—"

"I gathered that. Why did you say six? Why did you say I was here at six o'clock?"

"Because I'd told Mrs. Whyte you were," said Catherine.

Henry Chevron stared. The answer simply confounded him. He had to think, he had to think for several moments, before he even identified Mrs. Whyte as the woman in the next flat. No particular friend; cooperative, Catherine always said, about taking in groceries, but otherwise negligible.

"You told Mrs. Whyte," said Henry blankly, "that I was here last night at six? When I wasn't? For heaven's sake why?"

Catherine moistened her lips again. "Because she heard. I mean she must have. You know how thin these walls are. A man's voice. So when I met her in the corridor just afterwards, and she was just coming out, I knew she'd been there all the time, and I said you were home."

Henry walked over to the window. The movement had no purpose, it was like a prolonged jerk of the body. His mind, on the other hand, was working smoothly and efficiently; it quite surprised him to find how rapidly he grasped and explored every implication of those few brief sentences. So this was what their years of playing fair had come to, he thought; this was what his wife's playing fair had covered. He could even correct himself; Catherine's infidelity couldn't be of long standing, not years old. Her very foolishness, her flurry before the other woman in the corridor, proved her comparatively fresh to intrigue. Yet in sum, this was what those years had come to . . .

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"So when he asked me—" Catherine continued painfully—"the policeman—I said the same thing again. I hadn't time to think. And even if I had . . . Nothing seemed to have happened, last night!" cried Catherine. "You didn't seem upset about anything! How could I know?"

"Nothing of that matters," said Henry Chevron.

She was silent.

In the street below the window a bus stopped and several passengers got out. Henry knew most of them by sight; they were the people who always got out of that bus, at that hour, at that place. The man who always carried a bag of fruit carried his bag of fruit. The woman who always wore a red hat wore her red hat. Nothing in the world was changed—outside.

Was it necessary that everything should be changed, within?

"All right," said Henry Chevron reasonably, "you had a lover here. You could rely on my being late, it's the classic situation. Do I need to know who the chap is?"

Behind his back Catherine didn't move. He simply felt her looking at him.

"Don't you want to know?"

"I'm not sure," said Henry—reasonably. "It it's serious, if you're going to want a divorce, of course I must. Otherwise, perhaps the less I know the better. For instance, if it's anyone I do business with."

"It would be less brutal if you hit me," said Catherine.

To his annoyance she began to cry. Now that he was getting used to the idea, Henry himself found the situation less tragic than it should have been. In fact, it wasn't tragic at all. Their playing fair with each other had become too much like play-acting, their marriage too hollow a thing altogether to shed tears about. Even the academic knowledge that he'd been cuckolded didn't particularly distress Henry Chevron. He didn't feel jealous, only surprised.

Henry turned and looked at his wife carefully. It was a long time since he'd regarded her with such attention: he noted in detail the blonde hair, soft skin, delicate profile. At thirty-five, Catherine Chevron's prettiness was still girlish. She was a very pretty woman who looked far younger than her age. Even reddened with weeping, her eyes were pretty eyes. Henry Chevron found himself unmoved. He might have been looking at a stranger—the bestowal of whose prettiness on another man than himself naturally didn't affect him, because he felt no proprietary rights in it.

Evidently their marriage had been over far longer than he'd known.

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It would be a relief to give up play-acting. Indeed, now that they could both give up play-acting, Henry didn't see why they shouldn't get along together without any strain at all.

"Did you say you did want a divorce or didn't?" he asked Catherine.

To his surprise, she flinched. What had she said about being brutal? No husband alive, Henry assured himself, could be behaving with less brutality. However, she answered sensibly enough.

"No. Not just for an affair. That's all it is. Of course, if you want to divorce me—"

"Not at all," said Henry, with relief. "I can't think of a greater nuisance. I've a year's hard work ahead of me, and we're perfectly comfortable."

"Thank you," said Catherine. "Don't you want me to promise anything?"

Henry reflected. The habit of playing fair wasn't yet quite dead, and he himself intended to enjoy the fullest liberty; but he answered chiefly out of indifference. "Just don't make me look a fool. I shan't come home unexpectedly, and I shan't ask questions."

"It's Simon Richards," said Catherine.

The situation was no longer academic.

In one instant, everything was changed again. The fact that he'd been cuckolded, so calmly accepted—in an academic spirit—by Henry Chevron, was no longer a merely academic fact. The anonymous figure of his wife's lover had taken on name and face.

Henry hadn't to think so long as he'd thought before identifying Mrs. Whyte. He still had to think a moment. For it must have been at least a year earlier, the night he brought Simon Richards home for cocktails; it was fully six months since his work for Richards Hotels ended—a commission made unexpectedly disagreeable by the manners and personality of their proprietor. Unlike most big men, Simon Richards was a bully, a loudmouthed believer in keeping his employees on their toes, in fear and trembling. He couldn't bully Henry Chevron, Chevron being as much at the top of his tree as Simon Richards was at the top of his; the whole hotelier-world acknowledged that if anyone could convert four bedrooms into six, and still make them look reasonably spacious, it was Henry Chevron. But Simon Richards bullied everyone else Henry saw him in contact with; working for him had been like working for a slaver.

He hadn't been able to bully Henry Chevron; but he'd seduced his wife.

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"That oaf!" shouted Henry. He was trembling with rage, choking with disgust; if he'd moved one step towards his wife he would have struck her. "That sadistic baboon!"

"I know you never liked him," said Catherine.

Insanely, since it was the worst thing he could do if he wished to keep his control, Henry allowed his thoughts to dwell on Simon Richards' person. Women of naturally coarse taste no doubt found him attractive: he stood six foot three in his socks—as no doubt such women frequently saw him—and his great powerful head, blue-jowled, was thatched with curly black hair. Henry Chevron looked suddenly at his wife's hands. Catherine had pretty hands, small and slender. The thought of her running them through those tight black curls nauseated him.

"Your taste is coarser than I realised," said Henry Chevron. "Or did he give you diamonds? Have we anything cached away?"

"He never gave me anything," said Catherine. "He was lonely and I felt sorry for him."

"Don't strain my credulity too far," said Henry. "Let's settle for incontinence. But not even a garnet?" he mocked. "Just tears of loneliness, on those pretty little hands?"

"I have tried to keep them nice," said Catherine. "I didn't think you noticed."

The irrelevance of women!

"And you still don't want a divorce?" mocked Henry Chevron.

"I've told you," said Catherine, "that it's just an affair. He'd never marry me, because I'm too old. But he's fond of me in his way, and I've grown fond of him. You said you wouldn't ask questions—"

"And I shan't," agreed Henry Chevron.

At last he moved, violently—but not towards his wife, towards the bedroom.

"I'm leaving you," said Henry Chevron.

Where now was his placid acceptance of a not uncommon, indeed a classic situation? He plunged into the bedroom, pulled a suitcase from the top of the wardrobe, and began thrusting in shirts. "See him here as often as you like," called Henry Chevron, "but it won't be under my roof! Ring him up now, to say the coast's clear! I'm leaving!"

Catherine came running to the door; it gratified him to see that she looked frightened. "But you can't, you mustn't!" she cried.

"Why not?" demanded Henry—and as she laid a hand to the suitcase, struck it roughly away. "Why not, what's to stop me?"

"Scotland Yard," said Catherine.

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It was almost incredible: for the preceding half hour Henry had completely forgotten Scotland Yard. He'd completely forgotten his status as number one suspect in a potential murder case.

Catherine sat down on one of the beds. She looked frightened, but she was evidently making a strong effort to keep fear out of her voice—to speak—now that her warning had got through to him—calmly and reasonably. Her voice scarcely shook at all, only her hands.

"That policeman practically warned you, Henry, not to go away anywhere. I still don't see how they can possibly suspect you, you'd no motive, but if you rush away now what could look worse?"

Henry sat down opposite her. He and Catherine had slept in twin beds now for four or five years; the refurnishing of the bedroom, some four or five years earlier, neatly covering their indifference to each other. He knew that what Catherine said made sense; it also offered him a weapon to wound her with.

"I imagine they wouldn't be suspecting me at all," said Henry Chevron, "if that unsophisticated copper hadn't taken you for a faithful wife. Don't faithful wives notoriously alibi their husbands?"

Catherine nodded at once. She didn't cry again; she was thinking. Henry unexpectedly found himself recognising her attitude—chin on palms, her fingers pushed up into her hair. It had once been a joke between them that he could always tell when she'd been thinking, because it made her hair untidy. Well, now she had something to think about, he told himself bitterly.

"Then perhaps it would be best if you did go," said Catherine at last. "But to Scotland Yard first, Henry, to explain why you—why you can't spend another night under the same roof with me. Wouldn't that show them I haven't been alibi-ing you, only myself?"

There was sense in this, too. In a way, as Catherine said, it might be the best thing to do.

"And they can take a statement," Catherine went on, "or whatever it is, from Simon. To prove that you weren't here, and he was; and that would explain everything again."

"You think your lover would cooperate?" asked Henry.

"He'd have to," said Catherine simply. "They'd send that policeman, and I'd go with him."

Examining the implications of this, Henry was astonished to find himself uneasy.

"Wouldn't that pretty well finish everything between you?"

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"I suppose it would," said Catherine. "I'm still certain, Henry, we've found the right thing to do."

It was obviously the right thing to do.

Catherine's plan was obviously and eminently sensible. What astonished Henry Chevron now was his own reluctance to adopt it.

He found he didn't want to take the tale of his wife's infidelity to Scotland Yard for no other reason than that she was his wife.

The dragging-in of Simon Richards, distasteful in itself, was doubly distasteful because it would expose Catherine, his wife, as such a pathetic fool. As she must in her heart know she was to boot. "He'd never marry me, I'm too old." "He's fond of me, in his way . . ." What a fool she had been! Possibly he, Henry Chevron, was a fool too; but the instinct to protect his wife persisted. For the long and the short of it was, he still thought of Catherine as his wife.

"I'll stay here at any rate for tonight," said Henry Chevron.

Catherine opened her mouth to speak, hesitated, then, "You've had no dinner," she said. "You must be hungry."

He was hungry. He hadn't until that moment realised it, but he was famished. It was only half past seven, but the emotions of the last hour had been punishing.

They ate upstairs in the kitchenette. They could neither of them face the restaurant. Catherine had been crying too much; Henry was too tired. There were also twelve fresh eggs . . .

Catherine went about the business of making an omelet with great seriousness. She had a little bottle of dried herbs that Henry remembered. It could hardly be the same bottle, but it was the same sort; the sort his toothpowder came in, that Catherine, in the early years of their marriage, had always seized upon as soon as empty, to scald out and refill with herbs or peppercorns. It was a very familiar bottle.

Henry sat down to watch his wife cook for him. He would leave in the morning, but in the meantime he sat and watched her.

His wife's apron also was familiar—a silly confection of thin green muslin, embroidered over the pocket with a bunch of cherries. Any woman would have known it must have been put away carefully for years, to appear now so fresh; to Henry Chevron it was simply familiar. How did it happen? he wanted to ask—out of purely intellectual curiosity. How did it happen that for the last five years we've had nothing to say to each other? I know I've been busy, I've been terribly busy, but how the deuce did it happen? He naturally didn't utter the words aloud, since he was probably leaving in the morning, but it disconcerted him to see Catherine, as they crossed his mind, suspend the beating of her omelet.

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"It's not your fault," said Catherine. "I don't even know that it was mine. It just happened, when you got so busy. I've left the butter in the refrigerator, will you take it out?"

They ate in silence. When they'd finished, Henry automatically turned on the radio: a sugary version of the *Blue Danube Waltz* flowed lusciously forth. Catherine listened a moment, then switched it off. "I don't want to cry any more," she said reasonably.

"Shan't I help you wash up?" asked Henry.

"If you won't go to Scotland Yard in the morning, I shall," said Catherine. "No, thank you, Henry; I'd rather wash up by myself."

They hadn't used much crockery, only a plate and knife and fork apiece; like all good cooks, Catherine never washed the omelet pan. She was still in the kitchen nearly two hours later, by herself . . .

How could the night pass, except uneasily? Henry made up a bed on the sitting-room sofa; Catherine without question brought in blankets for him. Physically he was comfortable enough; only he couldn't sleep. He lay and worried about Catherine, his wife.

For he couldn't see what was to become of her. She herself was evidently under no illusion as to the consequences of what she meant to do. Simon Richards wouldn't forgive the publication of their affair—and to the police!—any more than he, Henry, had forgiven her betrayal of her marriage-vows: out of loyalty to a husband already lost, Catherine was about to lose her lover as well. And she wasn't a woman able to stand alone: her need of masculine support was Victorian—also one of the reasons why Henry Chevron had loved and married her . . .

About midnight, it struck him that Catherine too was probably lying awake, as much in need of comfort as himself.

About one in the morning, he acknowledged that it wasn't because he might be arrested that he, Henry Chevron, needed comfort, but because his marriage to Catherine, for whom he still needed to take thought, had finally come to an end. For all his success in converting four hotel bedrooms into six—for all his admitted supremacy in the country-club line—he needed someone to take thought for, someone who depended on him. As Catherine couldn't stand alone, no more could he. Their needs were different, but complementary.

At about two, Henry Chevron got up and went quietly to the bedroom door and quietly opened it. He wasn't, he assured himself, seeking comfort in his own distress; he simply wanted to see whether Catherine, awake, required comfort from him.

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He opened the door as quietly as possible, so that if she slept he wouldn't wake her. But his precautions turned out to be unnecessary; there Catherine stood, just on the other side of the door.

"Can't you sleep either, my darling?"

Which one of them spoke?

Of the case of old Mrs. Parkin, coshed and robbed, little more was ever reported. Upon regaining her wits, she cleared Henry Chevron almost casually—it was after a man came wanting to buy eggs, related Mrs. Parkin, that she'd been annoyed again by a man who wanted to sell her a broom. They were so cheap, however, that she decided to take one; and remembered no more after opening her bag, which had contained four pounds nine shillings and a penny.

It was their policeman who brought the Chevrons this good news, while they still sat at breakfast the following morning—so they ever after thought of him as "their" policeman. They pressed coffee upon him, and the last of the fresh eggs; he thanked them but refused with his usual kind authority. He was, in fact, quite unprofessionally happy, to relieve so united a couple from their anxiety. The atmosphere of the Chevron kitchen reminded him of his own cosy breakfasts at home. He didn't in his heart blame Mrs. Chevron at all for lying to him. He was convinced that she had seen the paragraph, but he didn't blame her at all for the lie she'd told to alibi her husband.

The truth was, of course, more complex. Catherine had lied to alibi herself. Yet out of this imbroglio—the passing danger to Henry bringing to light the constant threat to their marriage—had come the rediscovery of themselves as husband and wife. Henry had in truth been driving home . . .

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## *SOLUTION TO THE CASE OF THE MISSING IOUS IN FEBRUARY ARGOSY*

It was, as Bassett called it, truly the case of the missing IOUs, for to solve the code Bassett just made use of the vowels I, O, U, and respaced the words, thus producing:

LOUIS LOST HIS FIFTH THOU. THIS NIGHT
MUST INSIST FIRMLY BUT INNOCUOUSLY FOR (I)
THINK LOUIS MIGHT KILL IF (I) PUSH HIM
TOO MUCH

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# BOUND for the BRIDAL

**Countess:** **Tell me thy reason why thou wilt marry.**
**Clown:** **My poor body, madam, requires it. I am driven by the flesh; and he needs must go that the devil drives.**

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *All's Well That Ends Well*

*Young, I'd have have him too, and fair*
*Yet a man; with crisped hair . . .*
*Chestnut colour, or more slack,*
*Gold, upon a ground of black.*
*Venus' or Minerva's eyes,*
*For he must look wanton-wise . . .*
*'Twere too long to speak of all:*
*What we harmony do call*
*In a body should be there.*
*Well he should his clothes, too, wear,*
*Yet no tailor help to make him;*
*Drest, you still for man should take him . . .*
*Such a man, with every part,*
*I could give my very heart.*

BEN JONSON, *To Charis*

## *Love-letter*

Right reverent and worshipfull, and my right welebeloved Valentine. My lady my mother hath labored the matter to my ffadur full delygently, but she can no more gett than ye knowe of, for the which God knowyth I am full sory. But yf that yè love me, as I tryste verily that ye do, ye will not leave me therefor.

Wherefore, if ye could be content with that good, and my poor person, I would be the merriest maiden on ground. And if

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ye think not yourself so satisfied, or that ye might have much more good—good, true, and loving Valentine, that ye take no such labour upon you as to come any more for that matter, but let it pass and never more be spoken of, as I may be your true lover and bedewoman during my life.

MARGERY BRESS, *to John Paston*, 1477

*The girl with the beautiful face*
*is gathering olives.*
*The wind, that gallant of towers,*
*takes her by the waist.*
*Four riders passed*
*on Andalusian ponies,*
*with suits of blue and green,*
*with long dark cloaks.*
*" Come to Cordoba, lass."*
*The girl pays no heed . . .*
*When the evening became*
*purple, with diffused light,*
*a youth passed bringing*
*roses and myrtle of moon.*
*" Come to Granada, lass."*
*And the girl pays no heed.*
*The girl with the beautiful face*
*goes on gathering olives,*
*with the grey arm of the wind*
*encircling her waist.*

FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA, *Song*

## *Both sides of the question*

In Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* his lawe is that young people are to see each other stark-naked before marriage. Sir William Roper, of Eltham, in Kent, came one morning, pretty early, to my lord, with a proposall to marry one of his daughters. My lord's daughters were then both together abed in a truckle-bed in their father's chamber asleep. He carries Sir William into the chamber and takes the Sheete by the corner and suddenly whippes it off. They lay on their Backs, and their smocks up as high as their arme-pittes. This awakened them, and immediately they turned on their Bellies. Quoth Roper, I have seen both sides, and so gave a patt on her Buttock, he made choice of, sayeing, Thou art mine. Here was all the trouble of the wooeing.

JOHN AUBREY,
*Brief Lives*

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Young James reached out towards the other hand and it seemed to her that she could feel it coming as though the dusky candle-flickered air around her were but an extension and continuance of her own body, prickling to the touch as now her skin prickled, and now he was touching her truly, had hold of the hand, was drawing it to him . . .

" Good sakes, Catherine," he murmured, " good sakes, if I had but you in bed with me! "

She felt she should have protested, have cried out; maybe it was better to let on she hadna heard. It wasna the James she knew and respected, the lad of virtue and principle, walking in the way of the Lord. But it was a lad she liked awful well, that set a warm humming through her body of a kind she had never known . . .

NAOMI MITCHISON, *The Bull Calves*

## *Sweet dark*

*Now cease, ye damsels, your delights forepast;*
*Enough is it, that all the day was yours;*
*Now day is done, and night is nighing fast;*
*Now bring the bride into the bridal bowers.*
*The night is come, now soon her disarray,*
*And in her bed her lay;*
*Lay her in lilies and in violets,*
*And silken curtains over her display . . .*

EDMUND SPENSER, *Epithalamion*

## *Fetch the bride home*

I went out and found the bridal car waiting. Everything was in order, the horns of the oxen gilded, the wreaths and ribbons properly put on, and the canopy fixed. It was snowing again; not like meal, as before, but like large feathers . . .

We went jolting on through the wheel-ploughed slush, while in the glow of the torches the snow floated like great flakes of fire. People in the street bawled out the age-old jokes about the month of long nights and so forth; and from time to time I stood up in the car and shouted back the age-old answers. When we got near the house he leaned over and whispered to her not to be afraid. She nodded, and whispered back, " Melitta said I must scream." Then she added firmly, " But I told her no." —" I should say not, indeed. What a vulgar notion."—" And besides, I said to her, I am a soldier's daughter . . ."

When the time came, and he picked her up at the end of the bride-song, she put up her arms smiling, and caught him round the neck.

MARY RENAULT, *The Last of the Wine*

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**The law stops at the edge of the grave . . .**

# LIFE WORK OF JUAN DIAZ

## BY RAY BRADBURY

FILOMENA flung the plank door shut with such violence the candle blew out; she and her crying children were left in darkness. The only things to be seen were through the window—the adobe houses, the cobbled streets—where now the gravedigger stalked up the hill, his spade on his shoulder, moonlight honing the blue metal as he turned into the high cold graveyard and was gone.

"Mamacita, what's wrong?" Filepe, her eldest son, just nine, pulled at her. For the strange dark man had said nothing, just stood at the door with the spade and nodded his head, and waited until she banged the door in his face. "Mamacita . . . ?"

"That gravedigger." Filomena's hands shook as she relit the candle. "The rent is long overdue on your father's grave. Your father will be dug up and placed down in the catacomb, with a wire to hold him standing against the wall, with the other mummies."

"No, Mamacita!"

"Yes." She caught the children to her. "Unless we find the money. Yes."

"I—I will kill that gravedigger!" cried Filepe.

"It is his job. Another would take his place if he died, and another and another after him."

They thought about the man and the terrible high place where he lived and moved and the catacomb he stood guard over and the strange earth into which people went, to come forth dried like desert flowers and tanned like leather for shoes and hollow as drums which could be tapped and beaten, an earth which made great cigar-brown rustling dry mummies that might languish for ever leaning like fence poles along the catacomb halls. And thinking of all this familiar but unfamiliar stuff, Filomena and her children were cold in summer, and silent though their hearts made a vast stir in their bodies.

They huddled together for a moment longer and then: "Filepe," said the mother. "Come." She opened the door and

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they stood in the moonlight listening to hear any far sound of a blue-metal spade biting the earth, heaping the sand and old flowers. But there was a silence of stars. "You others," said Filomena, "to bed."

The door shut. The candle flickered.

The cobbles of the town poured in a river of gleaming moon-silver stone down the hills, past green parks and little shops and the place where the coffin-maker tapped and made the clock sounds of death-watch beetles all day and all night, for ever in the life of these people. Up along the slide and rush of moonlight on the stones, her skirt whispering of her need, Filomena hurried with Filepe breathless at her side. They turned in at the Official Palace. The man behind the small, littered desk in the dimly lit office glanced up in some surprise. "Filomena, my cousin!"

"Ricardo." She took his hand and dropped it. "You must help me."

"If God does not prevent; but ask."

"They . . ." The bitter stone lay in her mouth; she tried to get it out. . . "Tonight they are taking Juan from the earth."

Ricardo, who had half risen, now sat back down, his eyes growing wide and full of light, and then narrowing and going dull. "If not God, then God's creatures prevent. Has the year gone so swiftly since Juan's death? Can it truly be the rent has come due?" He opened his empty palms and showed them to the woman. "Ah, Filomena, I have no money."

"But if you spoke to the gravedigger. You are the police."

"Filomena, Filomena, the law stops at the edge of the grave . . ."

"But if he will give me ten weeks, only ten, it is almost the end of summer. The Day of the Dead is coming. I will make, I will sell, the candy skulls, and give him the money; oh, please, Ricardo."

And here at last because there was no longer a way to hold the coldness in and she must let it free before it froze her so she could never move again, she put her hands to her face and wept. And Filepe, seeing that it was permitted, wept too, and said her name over and over.

"So," said Ricardo, rising. "Yes, yes. I will walk to the mouth of the catacomb and spit into it. But, ah, Filomena, expect no answer. Not so much as an echo. Lead the way." And he put his official cap, very old, very greasy, very worn, upon his head.

The graveyard was higher than the churches, higher than all the buildings, higher than all the hills. It lay on the highest rise of all, overlooking the night valley of the town.

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As they entered the vast ironwork gate and advanced among the tombs, the three were confronted by the sight of the grave-digger's back, bent into an ever-increasing hole, lifting out spade after spade of dry dirt on to an ever-increasing mound. The digger did not even look up, but made a quiet guess as they stood at the grave's edge.

"Is that Ricardo Albanez, the chief of police?"

"Stop digging!" said Ricardo.

The spade flashed down, dug, lifted, poured. "There is a funeral tomorrow. This grave must be empty, open and ready."

"No one has died in the town."

"Someone always dies. So I dig. I have already waited two months for Filomena to pay what she owes. I am a patient man."

"Be still more patient." Ricardo touched the moving, hunching shoulder of the bent man.

"Chief of the police." The digger paused to lean, sweating, upon his spade. "This is my country, the country of the dead. These here tell me nothing, nor does any man. I rule this land with a spade, and a steel mind. I do not like the live ones to come talking, to disturb the silence I have so nicely dug and filled. Do I tell you how to conduct your municipal palace? Well, then. Good night." He resumed his task.

"In the sight of God," said Ricardo, standing straight and stiff, his fists at his sides, "and this woman and her son, you dare to desecrate the husband-father's final bed?"

"It is not final and not his, I but rented it to him." The spade floated high, flashing moonlight. "I did not ask the mother and son here to watch this sad event. And listen to me, Ricardo, police chief, one day you will die. *I* will bury you. Remember that: *I*. You will be in my hands. Then, oh, *then*."

"Then, what?" shouted Ricardo. "You dog, do you threaten me?"

"I dig." The man was very deep now, vanishing in the shadowed grave, sending only his spade up to speak for him again and again in the cold light. "Good night, Senor, Senora, nino. Good night."

Outside her adobe hut, Ricardo smoothed his cousin's hair and touched her cheek. "Filomena, ah, God."

"You did what you could."

"That terrible one. When I am dead, what awful indignities might he not work upon my helpless flesh? He would set me upside-down in the tomb, hang me by my hair in a far, unseen part of the catacomb. He takes on weight from knowing some day he will have us all. Good night, Filomena. No, not even that. For the night is bad."

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He went away down the street.

Inside, among her many children, Filomena sat with face buried in her lap.

Late the next afternoon, in the tilted sunlight, shrieking, the schoolchildren chased Filepe home; he fell, they circled him, laughing.

"Filepe, Filepe, we saw your father today, yes!"

"Where?" they asked themselves, shyly.

"In the catacomb!" they gave answer.

"What a lazy man! He just *stands* there!"

"He never works!"

"He don't speak! Oh, that Juan Diaz!"

Filepe stood violently a-tremble under the blazing sun, hot tears streaming from his wide and half blinded eyes.

Within the hut, Filomena heard, and the knife sounds entered her heart. She leaned against the cool wall, wave after dissolving wave of remembrance sweeping her.

In the last month of his life, agonised, coughing, and drenched with midnight perspirations, Juan had stared and whispered only to the raw ceiling above his straw mat.

"What sort of man am I to starve my children and hunger my wife? What sort of death is this, to die in bed?"

"Hush." She placed her cool hand over his hot mouth. But he talked beneath her fingers. "What has our marriage been but hunger and sickness and now nothing? Ah, God, you are a good woman, and now I leave you with no money even for my funeral!"

And then, at last, he had clenched his teeth and cried out at the darkness and become very quiet in the warm candleshine and taken her hands into his own and held them and sworn an oath upon them, vowed himself with religious fervour:

"Filomena, listen. I will be with you. Though I have not protected in life, I will protect in death. Though I fed not in life, in death I will bring food. Though I was poor I will not be poor in the grave. This I know. This I cry out. This I assure you. In death I will work and do many things. Do not fear. Kiss the little ones. Filomena. Filomena . . ."

And then he had taken a deep breath, a final thing, like one who settles beneath warm waters. And he had launched himself gently under, still holding his breath, for a testing of endurance through all eternity. They waited a long time for him to exhale. But this he did not do. He did not reappear above the surface of life again. His body lay like a waxen fruit on the mat, a surprise to the touch. Like a wax apple to the teeth, so was Juan Diaz to all their senses.

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And they took him away to the dry earth which was like the greatest mouth of all, which held him a long time, draining the bright moistures of his life, drying him like ancient parchment, until he was a mummy as light as chaff, an autumn harvest ready for the wind.

From that time until this, the thought had come and come again to Filomena, How will I feed my lost children: with Juan burning to brown crêpe in a silver-tinselled box, how lengthen my children's bones and push forth their teeth in smiles and colour their cheeks?

The children screamed again, outside, in happy pursuit of Filepe.

Filomena looked to the distant hill, up which bright tourists' cars hummed bearing many people from the United States. Even now they paid a peso each to that dark man with the spade so they might step down through his catacombs among the standing dead, to see what the sun-dry earth and the hot wind did to *all* bodies in this town.

Filomena watched the tourists' cars and Juan's voice whispered, "Filomena." And again, "This I cry out. In death I will work . . . I will not be poor . . . Filomena . . ." His voice ghosted away. And she swayed and was almost ill, for an idea had come into her mind which was new and terrible and made her heart pound. "Filepe!" she cried, suddenly.

And Filepe escaped the jeering children and shut the door on the hot white day and said, "Yes, Mamacita?"

"Sit, nino, we must talk, in the name of the saints, we must!" She felt her face grow old because the soul grew old behind it, and she said, very slowly, with difficulty, "Tonight, we must go in secret to the catacomb—"

"Shall we take a knife—" Filepe smiled wildly—"and kill the dark man?"

"No, no, Filepe, listen—"

And he heard the words that she spoke.

And the hours passed and it was a night of churches. It was a night of bells, and singing. Far off in the air of the valley you could hear voices chanting the evening Mass, you could see children walking with lit candles, in a solemn file, way over there on the side of the dark hill, and the huge bronze bells were tilting up and showering out their thunderous crashes and bangs that made the dogs spin, dance, and bark on the empty roads.

The graveyard lay glistening all whiteness, all marble snow, all sparkle and glitter of harsh gravel like an eternal fall of hail, crunching under their feet as Filomena and Filepe took their shadows with them, ink-black and constant from the unclouded

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moon. They glanced over their shoulders in apprehension, but no one cried Halt! They had seen the gravedigger drift, made footless by shadow, down the hill, in answer to a night summons.

Now: "Quick, Filepe, the lock!" Together they inserted a long metal rod between padlock hasps and wooden doors which lay flat to the dry earth. Together they seized and pulled. The wood split. The padlock hasps sprang loose. Together they raised the huge doors and flung them back, rattling. Together they peered down into the darkest most-silent night of all. Below, the catacomb waited.

Filomena straightened her shoulders and took a breath.

"One."

And put her foot upon the first step . . .

In the adobe of Filomena Diaz, her children slept, sprawled here or there in the cool night room, comforting each other with the sound of their warm breathing.

Suddenly their eyes sprang wide.

Footsteps, slow and halting, scraped the cobbles outside. The door shot open. For an instant the silhouettes of three people loomed in the white evening sky beyond the door. One child sat up and struck a match.

"No!" Filomena snatched out with one hand to claw the light. The match fell away. She gasped. The door slammed. The room was solid black. To this blackness Filomena said at last, "Light no candles. Your father has come home."

The thudding, the insistent knocking and pounding shook the door at midnight. Filomena opened the door.

The gravedigger almost screamed in her face.

"There you are! Thief! Robber!"

Behind him stood Ricardo, looking very rumpled and very tired and very old. "Cousin, permit us, I am sorry. Our friend here—"

"I am the friend of no one," cried the gravedigger. "A lock has been broken and a body stolen. To know the identity of the body is to know the thief. I could only bring you here. Arrest her."

"One small moment, please." Ricardo took the man's hand from his arm and turned, bowing gravely to his cousin. "May we enter?"

"There, there!" The gravedigger leapt in, gazed wildly about, and pointed to a far wall. "You see?"

But Ricardo would look only at this woman. Very gently he asked her, "Filomena?"

Filomena's face was the face of one who has gone through a

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long tunnel of night and has reached the other end at last, where lives a shadow of coming day. Her eyes were prepared now. Her mouth knew what to do. All the terror was gone now. What remained was as light as the great length of autumn chaff she had carried down the hill with her good son. Nothing more could happen to her ever in her life; this you knew from how she held her body as she said, "We have no mummy here."

"I believe you, Cousin, but—" Ricardo cleared his throat uneasily and raised his eyes. "What stands there against the wall?"

"To celebrate the festival of the Day of the Dead—" Filomena did not turn to look where he was looking—"I have taken paper and flour and wire and clay and made of it a life-size toy which looks like the mummies."

"Have you indeed done this?" asked Ricardo, impressed.

"No, no!" The gravedigger almost danced in exasperation.

"With your permission." Ricardo advanced to confront the figure which stood against the wall. He raised his flashlight. "So," he said. "And so."

Filomena looked out of the open door into the late moonlight. "The plan I have for this mummy which I have made with my own hands is good—"

"What plan, what?" the gravedigger demanded, turning.

"We will have money to eat with. Would you deny my children this?"

But Ricardo was not listening. Near the far wall he tilted his head this way and that and rubbed his chin, squinting at the tall shape which enwrapped its own shadow, which kept its own silence, leaning against the adobe.

"A toy," mused Ricardo. "The largest Death Toy I have ever seen. I have seen man-sized skeletons in windows, and man-sized coffins made of cardboard and filled with candy skulls, yes. But *this*! I stand in awe, Filomena."

"Awe?" said the gravedigger, his voice rising to a shriek. "This is no toy, this is—"

"Do you swear, Filomena?" said Ricardo, not looking at him. He reached out and tapped a few times on the rust-coloured chest of the figure. It made the sound of a lonely drum. "Do you swear that this is papier-mâché?"

"By the Virgin, I swear."

"Well, then." Ricardo shrugged, snorted, laughed. "It is simple. If you swear by the Virgin, what more need be said? No court action is necessary. Besides, it might take weeks or months to prove or disprove this is, or is not, a thing of flour paste and old newspapers coloured with brown earth."

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"Weeks, months, prove, disprove!" The gravedigger turned in a circle as if to challenge the sanity of the universe, held tight and impossible in these four walls.

"This 'toy' is mine, my property, mine!"

"The 'toy,'" said Filomena, serenely, gazing out at the hills, "if it *is* a toy, and made by me, must surely belong to me. And even—" she went on, quietly, communing with the new reserve of peace in her body—"even if it is *not* a toy, and it is indeed Juan Diaz come home, why then does not Juan Diaz belong first to God?"

How can one argue that? wondered Ricardo.

The gravedigger was willing to try. But before he had stuttered forth a half dozen words, Filomena said, "And after God, in God's eyes, and at God's altar and in God's church, on one of God's holiest afternoons, did not Juan Diaz say that he would be mine throughout his days?"

"Throughout his days, ah, ha, there you *are*!" said the gravedigger. "But his days are over, and now he is mine!"

"So," said Filomena, "God's property first, and then Filomena Diaz' property, that is if this toy is not a toy and is Juan Diaz, and anyway, landlord of the dead, you evicted your tenant, you so much as said you did not want him. If you love him so dearly and wish his return, will you pay the *new* rent and tenant him again?"

But so smothered by rage was the landlord of silence that it gave Ricardo time to step in.

"Gravekeeper, I see many months and many lawyers, and many points, fine points, to argue this way and that, which include real estate, toy manufacturers, God, Filomena, one Juan Diaz wherever he is, hungry children, the conscience of a digger of graves, and so much complication that death's business will suffer. In the circumstances are you prepared for these long years in and out of court?"

"I am prepared—" said the gravedigger, and paused.

"My good man," said Ricardo, "the other night you gave me some small bit of advice which I now return to you. I do not tell you how to control your dead. You now, do not say how I control the living. Your jurisdiction ends at the tombyard gate. Beyond stand my citizens, silent or otherwise. So—"

Ricardo thumped the upright figure a last time on its hollow chest. It gave forth the sound of a beating heart, a single strong and vibrant thump which made the gravedigger jerk.

Ricardo finished, "I pronounce this officially fake, a toy, no mummy at all. We waste time here. Come along, citizen gravedigger. Back to your proper land . . .!

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"Good night, Filomena's children, Filomena, good cousin."

"What about *it*, what about *him*?" said the gravedigger, motionless, pointing.

"Why do you worry?" asked Ricardo. "It goes nowhere. It stays if you should wish to pursue the law. Do you see it running? You do not. Good night. Good night."

The door slammed. They were gone before Filomena could put out her hand to thank anyone.

She moved in the dark to place a candle at the foot of the tall cornhusk-dry silence. This is a shrine now, she thought, yes. She lit the candle.

"Do not fear, children," she murmured. "To sleep now. To sleep." And Filepe lay down and the others lay back, and at last Filomena herself lay with a single thin blanket over her on the woven mat by the light of the single candle and her thoughts before she moved into sleep were long thoughts of the many days that made up tomorrow. In the morning, she thought, the tourist cars will sound on the road, and Filepe will move among them, telling them of this place. And there will be a painted sign outside this door: MUSEUM—30 *centavos*. And the tourists will come in because the graveyard is on the hill, but we are first, we are here in the valley, and close at hand and easy to find. And one day soon with these tourists' money we shall mend the roof, and buy great sacks of fresh corn flour, and some tangerines, yes, for the children. And perhaps one day we will all travel to Mexico City, to the very big schools because of what has happened on this night.

For Juan Diaz is truly home, she thought. He is here, he waits for those who would come to see him. And at his feet I will place a bowl into which the tourists will put more money than Juan Diaz himself tried so hard to earn in all his life.

Juan. She raised her eyes. The breathing of the children was hearth-warm about her. Juan, do you see? Do you know? Do you truly understand? Do you forgive, Juan, do you forgive?

The candle flame flickered.

She closed her eyes. Behind her lids she saw the smile of Juan Diaz, and whether it was the smile that death had carved upon his lips, or whether it was a new smile she had given him or imagined for him, she could not say. Enough that she felt him standing tall and alone and on guard watching over them and proud through the rest of the night.

A dog barked far away in a nameless town.

Only the gravedigger, wide awake in his tombyard, heard.

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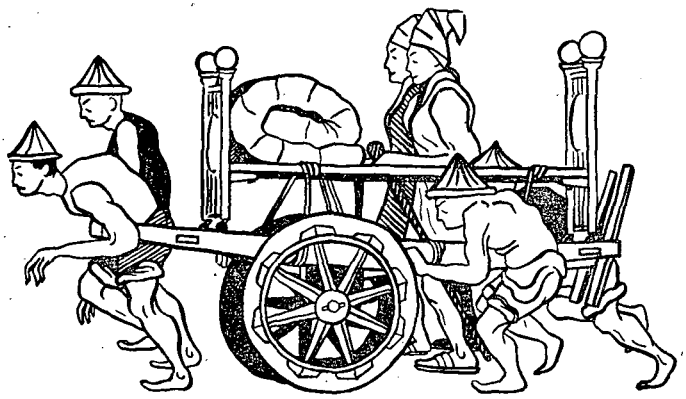

# The Bounciful Bed Company

THE Excellent House of One Thousand Delights and Hygienic Conditions stood a little outside the East Gate of old Chengtu.

And, lest the superior reader, while nodding assent at the one thousand delights, should lift an eyebrow at the suggestion of hygiene in China in the early years of this century, be it known that the Chinese had words for it—" wei sheng hsueh."

In the middle morning of a Szechewan summer the house was shut and still. The deep, white dust of the road before it still bore the marks of rickshaw wheels and of the sandals of bearers of sedan chairs. Indeed it was a matter of only a few hours since the last patron, the honourable Chiang, had stumbled wearily into his waiting rickshaw and had been trundled off, jowls swaying, to his home in the Street of Jewellers.

" She must be crammed with devils," he was saying.

The sun rose high, hunting the heat haze from all the hollows. Away to the west, eighty miles beyond the growling city, the Great Snow Mountains lifted slender peaks of purest white into the very top of the sky.

A low-slung, two-wheeled hand-truck, hauled and shoved by

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four sweating coolies, came along the roadway from out of the East Gate.

From inside the Excellent House of One Thousand Delights and Hygienic Conditions the shrill voice of old Madam Hwang was raised in abuse of some lazy servant of, if her word were to be taken, monstrous parentage.

A window opened on the first floor.

A girl looked out of it. Her face was a perfect oval of pale honey, framed by the piled black hair into which she was twining with slender fingers small yellow mei-kuei hua blossoms.

The girl was Tou Lu, which is as if to say Teasing Crisp Freshness, as of perhaps green, dewy grass.

She looked up the road; and the approaching truck caught her attention, at first casual, then acute. For the truck bore a strange burden. What could that object be, so square, so upright, and glittering in the strong light at its topmost points with a brilliance greater than the gleam of gold?

Nor were wonders exhausted yet. Alongside the truck, with dejected mien, walked two young men of excessively virile appearance. Though stained with much travel, and clearly not in the best of spirits, they appeared to Tou Lu on that bright morning to possess so many of the proper attributes of man that her rising petulance caused by the honourable jeweller Chiang's basic inadequacies quite passed away.

As happens, alas, at so many of mankind's crucial moments, Tou Lu, stirred by sentimental feelings, entirely overlooked the fact that she was witnessing one of history's unheralded leaps forward.

The object on the truck was a cast-iron, brass-embellished bedstead, furnished with—enter, felicity—a spring mattress, the first spring mattress in this far west of China.

When the truck stopped outside the door, Tou Lu properly removed herself from the window and stood back in her dim-lit room where she could see without being observed.

The coolies stood limply upright, mopping their brows and mentioning in their rough Szechewan way that they were lastleggish, very. The two young men were surveying the long house with obvious commercial interest, and with just as obvious lack of hopefulness.

How came it that these two should be outside this doorway with so unusual a load?

By LESLIE BONNET

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It had started in a teahouse in far Fu-Chien. The great brass bedsteads from England had long been known at the coastal ports. It had occurred to several Chinese business concerns at the same time that this agreeable foreign vehicle might be profitably introduced into the interior.

The transport of stock was difficult and costly, and perilous, too, when the terrifying Yangtse Gorges had to be braved.

But shortly, a thousand miles of pain and trouble were endured by those who represented no less than six separate and competing hardware firms. And six unhappy commercial travellers hawked their unwonted beds from city to city throughout the far west.

Finally, dispirited, the six met by chance at the teahouse in Fu-Chien. They talked, as commercial travellers the world over talk in such, and in any other, circumstances.

Then one, a Cantonese—he was wilier than the rest—spoke.

"In vain," he said, "one offers the unaccustomed to the unadaptable. For myself, I am too fatigued to continue and too unsuccessful to go home. Rapidly my cash resources dwindle. I am of a mind to put matters to the test in some way which will not further tax my ever-declining strength."

His companions nodded responsively.

He continued. "We six are wasting our efforts in competing for a market which we can none of us find. Perhaps this is because we are of the Far East and our speech sounds strangely to these provincials. Perhaps it is because the people of these parts are too gross and ignorant to forsake their hard kangs and try the delights of resilient couches.

"Whatever the reason, why should we not husband our slender reserves? Why should not one selling expedition take the place of six?"

These remarks gained instant approbation.

"But how shall we choose," asked a crafty-faced representative from Shanghai, "which of us is to undertake the work?"

"If my suggestion finds favour," replied the Cantonese, "we may all stay here in comfort in Fu-Chien. Let us appoint our own commercial traveller from amongst these rude but undeniably cunning men of Fu-Chien. Then, while he labours on our behalf at less than one-sixth of the cost of all of us, we may recline here at ease and enjoy enlightened conversation for as long as our store of dollars will last."

"But how shall we determine," pressed the man from Shanghai, "when a sale is effected, which firm's merchandise has been sold?"

"The matter is simple," said the Cantonese. "Different in small particulars, the beds are essentially the same. One sample

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will serve. In the unlikely event of any sales we will cast lots as to who is to benefit by each sale. Such lot-casting will greatly tend to pass our time agreeably."

Thus it was that twin brothers were both hired—because they would not separate—to assist in the introduction of the spring bed into those remote regions. The family name of these young fellows was Han and their personal names were Hsiang and Ssu.

Now on that roadway out of Chengtu, Ssu spoke to his twin brother, Hsiang.

"Brother Hsiang," he asked, "why do we come outside the city in this manner, and stop here? This is a house of felicity and one attended by persons of high rank. Moreover it is no time of day for brisk behaviour. And furthermore, brother, how may unsuccessful pedlars of monstrous foreign beds aspire to such diversions?"

Hsiang struck his head despairingly. "I have a mind to make an end of this," he said. "For twenty days we have hawked this object about the city. No person of substance will even look at it. To tread the city streets any longer I am ashamed. Even the very beggars mock us. So we are come a little outside the gates. We will sell Goddards' Patent Sprung Cast-Iron Bedstead here."

"But never!" exclaimed Ssu. "Where is there a profession more conservative than this one? Are we to teach them to abandon the Imperial Schedule of Approved and Accepted Postures? What kind of control could one exercise on this unstable contrivance?"

Hsiang lifted a restraining hand. "What you say, brother Ssu, is true. But I have been giving much thought to the matter of this bed. It is in my mind that it may be more valuable in its parts than it is entire."

He gave an order to the coolies who quickly unroped and dismantled the bedstead.

"Now observe, brother," said Hsiang. "This head of the bed, what a resplendent gate it makes. How suitable and dignity-attracting it would look before the doorway here. These glittering brass knobs, how grand and gay. And the other end, smaller, but no less attention-demanding. It would be exactly suitable for the gateway at the back."

Ssu could not conceal his admiration. "A splendid plan," he cried. "No doubt at all that the honourable lady owner of this establishment will leap to secure such embellishments. But—" Doubt creased his brow—"what is to be done with the mattress?"

"I confess," conceded Hsiang, "that the mattress did cause

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me some painful thought; but it shall provide knife-frustrating armour for the personal bodyguard of Marshal Wang."

"Oh, excellent!" cried Ssu. "And the Patent Bed itself, with all those shining springs—you have, ingenious Hsiang, a use for that too?"

"I trust to sell it at a high price to the owner of this establishment. It is in my mind that a skilful and persistent musician might well get a tune out of it."

"Admirable." Ssu lifted up the head of the bed, all shining black and gleaming brass. "Let us beat upon the door."

It was an irritable Madam Hwang who flung open the door and confronted these personable salesmen.

Blinking in the sunshine she demanded, "What uproar is this? Do you intend to waken the whole house? Have I not troubles enough? Say quickly what you want. You can't have it. Then, be gone."

The truth was that Madam was still smarting from the complaints of the worthy jeweller, Chiang. Like so many of the persons of good standing and ripe years who frequented the House of One Thousand Delights and Hygienic Conditions, Chiang would consort with no other than Tou Lu. Drawn to her as by a magnet, these responsible citizens would nevertheless never fail to complain of the undue exertions which they were constrained to undergo. All of them arrived on their appointed evenings, avid, gaping like carp, and left, early or late, staring and astonished.

Madam scarce knew what to do with Tou Lu. Village bred, yet of a delicate beauty that astounded, she had exhibited from her earliest beginning, at the Trial of the Bud, a heroic willingness, an energetic aptitude for her tasks entirely unbecoming to her profession.

Rich and regular clients complained, and spoke of nervous sweats when in their own homes.

The worthy Chiang had departed only a short time before, looking alarmingly debilitated, and speaking sadly of an early death. Small wonder that Madam was in no mood for salesmen's chatter.

Indeed the door would have been slammed in the faces of Hsiang and Ssu had not the face of Tou Lu, who had just deserted the window, appeared, looking down from the balcony of the first floor.

"Why have you broken up that strange thing?" she called.

Hsiang looked up at her.

"It is only some gates," shouted Madam Hwang.

"Bring them up here."

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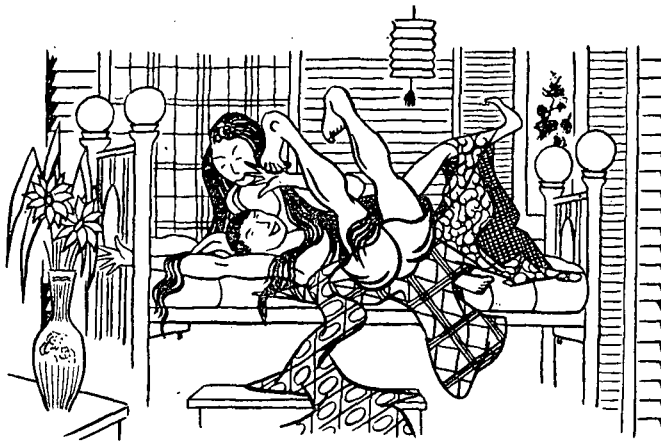

"I'll have no rubbish like this in this house," complained Madam.

"Up here," said Tou Lu imperiously.

Madam threw up her head.

Tou Lu stamped a tiny foot.

Madam signed to Hsiang to comply. Bit by bit the Goddards' Patent Sprung Cast-Iron Bed was carried into Tou Lu's room.

When at last the mattress itself had been hauled and lugged up the rude stairway, Hsiang instructed the coolies to set it up in its solid entirety.

As part was added to part, Tou Lu paced round it, suspicious as a cat about something new.

And as she was so engaged Hsiang could not prevent himself from admiring her lithe form. Beneath her gown, little button breasts, unconfined at this hour, nodded like lotus buds on a rippled pool. Her hips seemed never to be still, as if a separate creature trembled there.

The bed was at last erected. Over the twanging springs the mattress had been laid. The coolies were dismissed. Ssu, seized with evident physical misgivings, had retired to guard the truck.

From his side of the bed Hsiang bent over to compress the mattress. "Perhaps the gracious lady will consent to try the springiness of it?" he suggested.

Tou Lu from the bed's other side leaned over also, to plunge two tiny fists into the mattress's yielding depth. Under this

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joint onslaught the mattress sagged in a resourceful manner. For a moment two foreheads touched above the bouncing bed. For a moment Hsiang gazed into dark, glancing eyes.

Then, clutching each other in a vain attempt to maintain balance, the couple fell in a heap upon Goddards' Patent Sprung Cast-Iron Bed.

To disrobe, unpractised, on a yielding surface banishes dignity and promotes merriment. Tou Lu's carefully piled hair was clinging in a shiny black tangle about her exquisitely moulded face long before her honey-pale body lit the shaded room. Then laughing, her slanted eyes wet, she clung to an even yet dishevelled Hsiang.

The silver tinkle of her laughter mingled with the twang of new springs and the slightly distressful cries of Hsiang. All of these sounds reached the distended ear of Madam Hwang, twitching outside the door . . .

Outside on the highway the day was advancing. The sun climbed boldly into the bleached sky. The throng of packmen and carriers, bearing the food for Chengtu into the city, eddied past the empty truck on which Ssu squatted with cheerful patience.

Day declining, the sun slid slowly down the heavens towards where the Great Snow Mountains craned. The flow of traffic had turned and was surging out of the city. Hsiang, in his turn, lay upon the truck.

The western peaks were leaping with extravagant colours of pink and green and blue and purple before Ssu emerged from the House of One Thousand Delights and joined him.

Then the brothers called to the verge-squatting coolies. The empty truck was hauled back towards Chengtu . . .

Fortunate and happy is the woman who, amidst severe distractions, can plan for the benefit of those she loves. Such a one Tou Lu now was.

For two things on this felicitous day had happened to her.

In the first place she had conceived an extraordinary affection for Hsiang and Ssu. She could not well have loved one without

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loving the other, for they were almost indistinguishable.

Secondly, Tou Lu had perceived business possibilities in Goddards' Patent Sprung Cast-Iron Bedstead. She had a practical sense which should have found outlet long before this time. Perhaps the nag of only partial satisfaction had distracted her. Now, momentarily tranquil, her thoughts sped.

The upshot was made clear when Hsiang and Ssu called, by appointment, the very next morning.

Madam Hwang greeted them, smiling and bowing.

" Please to enter my poor house, Gracious Sirs."

There had been no complaints this last evening from clients of Tou Lu. Both of them—for Tou Lu as No. 1 Girl played only two houses a night—had been enraptured with Goddards' Patent Sprung Cast-Iron Bedstead. Madam could see the necessity arising of large-scale purchases and a resultant wealth-enhancing trade boom.

Tou Lu had other thoughts.

" There is magic in this machine," she told the brothers. " It promotes agility without entailing exertion. Without doubt my patrons will wish to enhance their domestic lives with its aid.

" I have many dollars saved," she told them, " and banked with the goldsmith, Wei. When there is enough I shall purchase my freedom. But perhaps it can be increased by business. It is my thought that we should go into trading, we three."

Tou Lu, Hsiang, and Ssu looked at each other, their eyes meeting in turn. The pact was made. With laughter and with tears they embraced each other.

" We will call our firm The Bounciful Bed Company," said Tou Lu.

Business arrangements are engrossing only to those who benefit by them. Suffice to say that an understanding was quickly reached between The Bounciful Bed Company and those by now near-cashless commercial travellers at Fu-Chien. Then, those persons' supplies exhausted, arrangements were made, more slowly, for reliable supplies from the far coast.

The Bounciful Bed Company flourished. Superior persons throughout Chengtu, and indeed throughout the great province of Szechewan, came to consider it a proper part of gracious living to sleep upon springs.

Alas, the march of commerce too often drives out the social graces. And there were not lacking those lovers of established ways to point out that one might as well attempt to erect a pack of cards upon the sea waves as to practise on a sprung bed arts which had depended in their nicety upon the use of a firm and unyielding base.

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But such carping found few hearers. The partners' business grew larger and larger.

And so prosperity came to Hsiang and Ssu and to Tou Lu.

Tou Lu, more beautiful, as compliant, as exuberant as ever, free now from the cramped routine of the House of One Thousand Delights and Hygienic Conditions, occupied a fine residence in the Street of The Embroiderers where she entertained none but Hsiang and Ssu.

They were days, years, of affluence and felicity. Hsiang and Ssu grew in the esteem of men and in that gratifying girth that betokens commercial success. There were none in Chengtu's circle of merchants and traders who did not count their company, which, in respect of each of them, was available on alternate days, as an honour.

And Tou Lu, so loving, so doubly beloved, yet contrived to engross herself in any matters which would further the good fortune of The Bounciful Bed Company. It was as if there were two Tou Lus, her never-still body and herself.

And matters went on in this over-perfect manner as years were added to years, as if life could continue ever thus; as if the leaf could endure from tender green to autumn gold without ever a blemish . . .

And then Tou Lu died. One day she was well. The next day she was sick. On the third day the mourners shouted their laments.

Needless to dwell upon the griefs of Hsiang and Ssu. Prosperous and eminent, all that they could wish for was theirs, except the laughing, slanted eyes, the silver-belled laughter, and the sumptuous body of Tou Lu.

The business they maintained, faithfully, conscientiously.

Tou Lu they never replaced. Nor did they ever weary of talking of her wonders. "Do you remember how her left cheek dimpled when she laughed?" Hsiang would ask.

"Ayee-ah, indeed," Ssu would answer, "and how her shoulder . . ." And so they would go on. Nobody could replace Tou Lu.

It was some six years after her death. They were still talking in this way, grown men now, of some forty years.

"And how like the dip in the flight of the swallow was the curve of her leg," said Hsiang, pouring for Ssu another cup of hot rice wine.

Ssu rubbed his chin, on which the first beginnings of a dignity-bestowing beard could just be seen.

"How like, indeed."

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"And the grace with which she wielded the fan," pressed Hsiang.

"Ah. The little blue fan."

"Green, I think it was, dear brother Ssu."

"But blue, surely?"

Hsiang laughed pacifically. "Blue or green—there was a fan."

"Surely. There was a fan."

"I am reminded, dear brother . . ." said Hsiang. "Was it not yesterday that you directed my recollection to the small mole which appeared so attractively above the left breast of Tou Lu? I have been thinking since: was it not above the right breast?"

"Ayee-ah. Right or left. Does it matter so long as there was a mole? I think there was."

"There might have been," said Hsiang.

Ssu coughed. Sighed. Looked at his brother keenly.

"To be honest, dear Hsiang, can you really remember what she looked like?"

Hsiang's face darkened with embarrassment.

"Well," he conceded, "perhaps not in every particular."

"In any particular at all?"

"Well, no. I have to confess that I can't."

"Nor can I," said Ssu, with tears in his eyes.

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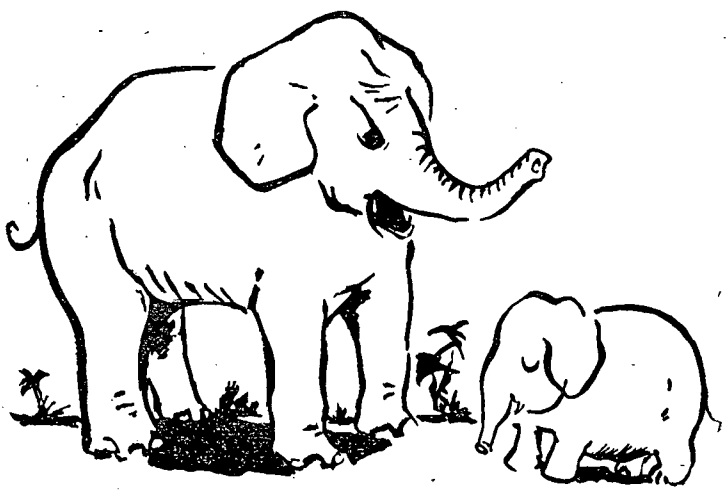

*"What do you mean—you FORGOT?"*

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# MAP OF MUTINY

## BY DARRELL BATES

AT TWO in the morning the deck of the ship was deserted. Below the rail the sea went by quietly and smoothly like rolls of oiled silk on a production line, and the engines pulsed and pounded away somewhere in the body of the ship like the beat of some monstrous heart.

It was very hot down in the cabins, and I had come up on deck for air. We were in the Red Sea, somewhere off Massawa, heading for home. I hadn't bothered to put my shoes on, and because of that I suppose he didn't hear me.

He was standing in front of the map. It was one of those maps they always have on ships which show all the reefs and islands, and the depth of the sea in fathoms and the route of the ship marked in blue pencil and its position day by day. The man just stood there staring at the map, and I saw him raise his hand and trace the outline of some islands with his fingertip, with lingering slowness as one might touch for the first time, or the last, a guarded curve or hollow of a woman's flesh.

I stood still, embarrassed at catching him unawares and yet not wanting to move or speak and reveal that I was there. But something must have betrayed my presence and he wheeled round and faced me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was just walking along the deck . . ." I didn't know what else to say.

He stared at me for a moment with anger in his eyes. He had pale grey-green eyes in a thin lined fact that made one think of ulcers or middle-aged regret, and large bony restless hands. I had seen him once or twice sitting at one of the tables in the bar, or walking round the deck. Always he was with a woman who was rather too obviously his wife. A trim, erect sort of a woman, with well-ordered blue-rinsed hair and capable blue-veined hands. She had a precise uncurving mouth that was always carefully and moderately rouged, and her fingertips were palely red as if she dipped them every morning in the blood of some anaemic bird.

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## The girl with a skin of dusty copper offered him a string of beads

With her the man looked, I thought, like a dog on a lead. A chihuahua, not very well kept, or a poodle without a pedigree.

After a bit the anger went out of his eyes and he managed a wavering diffident sort of smile.

"I was being stupid . . . " His hands sketched an apology in the air. "I was looking at some islands," he explained, looking at me now to see what my reaction would be.

"I like islands too," I said. It was true, but I suppose I only said it to solace him for my intrusion.

"The Comoro Islands . . . " It came out after a moment of hesitation like the confession of a weakness or some small secret sin.

"Have you ever been there?"

"No," he said quietly. "No. I've never been there."

"Are you planning to go?" I asked, turning my head away to make the question seem so casual and disinterested that he would not be put off with the thought that I was being too curious.

"No," he said. "No. I shall never go there."

"Then why . . .?" I started, and then I stopped. I began to wonder if he wasn't perhaps just slightly round the bend.

We walked over to the ship's rail and leaned on it, and looked at the sea.

"I know," he said, as if he guessed my thoughts, "that it must sound rather odd.

"It's difficult," he went on. "It's difficult to explain."

"I've got some beer in my cabin," I said after a long silence. "Would you like to come and have a drink?"

He was about forty-five, I supposed, or fifty, as I watched his face and his bony restless hands cupped round his glass. He had seemed at first to be a shy, taciturn man, but slowly the privacy of the cabin and the effect of the beer perhaps encouraged him to talk. As he talked it was as if he were shedding an outer, protective skin that he wore to conceal a core that was too vulnerable to expose to the world, and particularly to other men.

"They are beautiful, I've heard, quiet and peaceful, and very beautiful."

I knew of course that he was talking again about the Comoro Islands. I had never been there myself but I knew other islands in the Indian Ocean that were much the same. They lie in the wide channel of sea between Madagascar and the African Coast. It was there I remembered that they had found the coelacanth.

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"Did you know someone who had been there?" I asked. The islands are rather off the beaten track, and it wasn't every day that you came across people who knew them.

"Yes," he said conventionally, "but it's a long story . . ." and then, as if acting under some sort of sudden impulse, he drank off the rest of his beer.

"Would you like to hear about it?"

"Yes," I said.

When he was twenty-five, he told me, he had come out to East Africa to work for a firm that dealt in cotton. His job was to go round persuading the Africans to grow cotton in their fields and then to buy it from them for his firm.

It was a humdrum sort of life, but then, he explained with a diffident smile, he was a humdrum sort of man. He had a small flat in Dar es Salaam, and a car. He liked the travelling, driving along the empty roads, and the walking along the quiet sandy tracks to the small fields and the scattered huts of the country people. He became interested in birds, and he would stop for minutes and if he felt like it for hours watching them circling and hunting for insects and collecting material for their nests. He liked the independence of his way of life, and he also liked, he told me, the solitariness of it too.

"I always was a solitary sort of person," he said. "Everyone else seemed to be so much better at things, more worldly-wise than I. When I talked to people, they somehow contrived to make me feel inferior in almost every way. With one person or two perhaps it wasn't so bad. It didn't seem then so much that they did it purposely, though the effect of course was just the same. But when there were a lot of people, at school for instance, or at the tennis club in the town where I lived in England, or at parties, it was as if it was a sort of game, a harsh, cruel, taunting game in which I was always on the losing side.

"That was one reason I suppose," he went on, "why I left home and went out to Africa. I thought I could be more alone, more myself out there. But—" he spread his hands.

I knew what he meant of course. In towns in the out-of-the-way places in Africa there was less chance of being alone, of leading one's own life than there was at home. To act differently from the rest, to think differently in communities like this soon becomes a major sin.

"So I spent most of my time travelling. It suited the firm of course. They liked having me on their books. 'Useful chap that,' they would say. 'Always out on the job.' The other men preferred to stay in the towns as much as they could. They were

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gregarious chaps. They liked parties and people, and they got promotion quicker that way too . . .

" I was a bachelor then of course," he said, " but I lived a quiet life . . . "

He didn't expand on that but I could imagine that he had been an inward-looking, lonely and not particularly prepossessing creature, shy and ill-equipped to compete for the limited number of European girls in Dar es Salaam.

" When I was thirty-four," he went on, " I got married."

He got up then and started pacing about the cabin. " I don't quite know how it happened," he said, looking away from me towards the porthole, " but you know how it is in places like that. She came up and introduced herself at a party.

" ' You don't look as if you liked parties,' she said. I didn't know what to say, so I offered her a cigarette." He was talking to himself, drawing on his memory, and pausing every now and then to shut his eyes as if to focus the exact words that had been used and the things he had felt.

" Do you know," he went on, looking at me for a moment, " that when she said yes and took one of the cigarettes from my case I felt as if I had already proposed and been accepted. Afterwards, back in my flat, although I couldn't even remember what she looked like I felt that I had somehow started on a chain of small obligations that would never, never end . . . " He spread his hands out palm upwards. " We got married about a year later."

" Have some more beer," I said. There didn't seem anything else to say. I wondered what all this had got to do with the islands whose outline he had been tracing on the map. I looked at my watch and saw that it was nearly three.

" Are you married? "

Up to now I had been asking the questions and it came as a surprise when he interjected a question of his own. But as soon as I replied, shaking my head, I saw that there was no curiosity or answer-seeking in the question. If I was married, the expression on his face implied, then I would understand what he meant. And if I wasn't, then it was no use his trying to explain. It was that sort of question. " No," I said, to confirm the movement of my head. " No, I'm not married."

He didn't say anything for some time. I sipped my beer and looked at the taut thin lines of his head and neck. Like a tortoise, I thought this time, that had poked its head out of its shell for a moment and apprehensive all the time of the space and the fresh air and the other creatures that lived and existed outside the safety and the familiar confines of the shell.

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"Well—" he started, and then suddenly he broke off and abandoned the subject of marriage. "I went on with my job, of course. I still travelled about the countryside, visiting the villages and talking to the people and buying up their cotton.

"My wife came with me once. But she didn't like it. She didn't like the dust, and the flies, and the bumpy roads, or the people . . . After that once she didn't come any more."

"Did you mind?" I asked. I knew what the answer would be but I wanted to keep him talking.

He shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I was glad. That once she came with me she contrived somehow to take all the pleasure out of the travelling and to leave only the discomfort and the tiredness. So after that I always went alone."

I filled up his glass with beer, and mine. But he didn't drink, and for a long time he didn't say anything more.

"She was a good wife though in many ways . . ."

"Yes," I said. "I'm sure." I wondered why he had said "was" instead of "is." I had no doubt that it was the same woman who was with him now.

"She looked after me very well and saw that I was properly fed and dressed . . . and things like that . . ." He was anxious now it seemed to rub out the sharp edges of his criticism, to ease the marital disloyalty. Or was it that he was afraid that I, or the cabin walls perhaps, would echo what he had said into the prying, ubiquitous ears of his wife?

"Yes," I said again. "I'm sure."

He didn't say anything more so I asked a question.

"Did you have any children?"

"Oh no," he said quickly. "She . . . We . . ."

His voice trailed off and drifted away and was lost in the synthetic cabin air.

It was a long time before he went on with his story . . . "Some years later," he said, "just when I was leaving a small town up the coast, a man came running towards my car. He was much taller than the coastal people usually are, and when he was closer I saw that he had an unusual colouring to his skin. It looked like dusty copper.

"He stood there in front of me; he was breathing heavily from the running.

"'What is it?' I said. I had a long way to go and I was in a hurry to be away.

"'Our aunt,' he said. 'Our aunt. She is very ill.'

"'Why don't you take her to the hospital?' I said. There was, I knew, a small Government hospital in the town with an Indian doctor in charge.

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" ' No,' he said. ' It will not do. I must take her to the big hospital in Dar es Salaam where the white doctors are.

" ' Please! ' he said, seeing the reluctance and the impatience in my face, ' please help us.'

" In the end I agreed. They brought the woman on a stretcher and we put her in the back of the car. The man got in as well and another woman who I supposed was his wife or his sister. They all, I saw, had the same dusty-copper coloured skin.

" On the way they explained who they were. ' We are from the Comoros,' they said. 'We are different from these other people here. They are black, and we are . . . ' They sketched their meaning with a gesture of the hands . . . ' We are half and half.'

" I left them at the door of the hospital. I waved good-bye, and they in return raised their hands in quiet, sad salutation. I didn't expect to see or hear of them again.

" When I told my wife about it she said she wouldn't go in the car again until it had been cleaned and disinfected.

" ' You shouldn't have done it,' she said. ' Lord knows what dirty diseases she had.' Before we were married she had been a nursing sister at the hospital.

" ' But . . . ' I started.

" ' Don't be so soft. Stuck up, these half-castes are. Why couldn't they go to the local hospital like everybody else . . . ? '

" A year later, when I was on another visit to the same small town along the coast, I received a message. It was written in pencil on a piece of crumpled paper, and it was brought to me at the resthouse by a small boy in a ragged dusty shirt. It was written in English.

" *Please to honour us, sir, at our house at nine o'clock this night.*

" ' Who is this from? ' I asked the boy.

" ' Ton Ton Pierre,' he said.

" ' Who is he? '

" ' The Comoro man. The man with the yellow skin.'

" ' Oh,' I said, and I remembered then the incident about the sick aunt.

" ' Where does he live? '

" ' Over there.' He pointed towards the palm trees behind the town. ' Everybody knows his house.'

" I hadn't really meant to go, but somehow I felt restless sitting there reading a book that didn't interest me and listening to the sea lapping monotonously on the sandy shore.

" I got up suddenly and walked through the quiet dark streets of the town towards the house where the Comoro man lived.

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It was nearly ten o'clock and soon I could hear the sound of singing and clapping coming from that direction.

" ' We are glad,' they said, ' we are glad that you came.'

" They led me through a thatched house with a courtyard at the back. It was a square fenced with coconut fronds plaited together and lit by lamps and lanterns that hissed and glowed and made little islands of light and warmth and welcome against the dark invasion of the African night.

" ' See,' they said, leading me to a row of chairs set behind a wooden table. ' See, she is better. She is well now, thanks to God, and thanks to you.'

" The old aunt took my hand in her two dry yellow hands but she said nothing. I sat in the chair next to hers and the others withdrew and left us there.

" It's too hot in here," he said suddenly. " Let's go up on deck." The deck was quiet and long and empty. We leaned on the rail and looked at the sea. He said nothing for a long time and I began to wonder if I should ever hear the rest of his story.

" One by one," he started again, without turning his head, " they came out of the house and out of the shadows into the circle of light beyond the table. First the men, and then barefooted and silent on the sand there came a string of girls in a weaving line like coloured beads on a thread of necklace.

" A tall thin man with the same yellow skin stood out, a little apart from the others, and began to sing. He sang in a harsh, high-pitched voice like a singer of flamenco, and the others chorused him and cried and clapped their hands.

" ' He is the bridegroom,' the old woman said. ' He is my sister's youngest son.'

" ' Ah,' I said.

" ' Yes.' She reached out and took my hand again. ' Yes. It is a wedding party.'

" As the man sang, and as the men stood in groups supporting him, the line of girls moved like a necklace still weaving in and out between the groups of men. They wore skirts of coloured cloth, and highly coloured turbans on their heads, and copper bangles on their arms and wrists. The girl leading the line wore a blouse, a white blouse with the pattern of a peacock pricked out in brilliant blues and greens and gold. She was the bride, they said.

" The singing and the dancing went on and on. The sounds were the same, and the cadence and the movements. At first it seemed monotonous, but gradually, gradually as I sat there at the table with the old aunt's light, dry hands in mine,

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the rhythm of it seemed to seep into me, until my mouth was forming the sounds of the song and my feet were moving to the slow, compulsive beat. They had put a bottle on the table and a couple of glasses. It was a rather tasteless brew but like the singing and the dancing it had a gradual cumulative effect . . .

" As I sat there watching, my eyes concentrated more and more on one figure in the moving line of girls. And yet I couldn't think why. Most of the girls were fully grown with rich warm curves and roving uninhibited eyes. But the one that caught and held my eyes, as she weaved and shuffled in between the groups of men, was a frail fragile creature with downcast eyes and thin childlike arms. She seemed somehow among the others like a fruit on a damaged stem that hadn't had a chance to ripen.

" Only once did she raise her eyes and look at me as she shuffled in line past the table. Her eyes, I saw then, were sad and hurt like a gazelle that has been wounded by a careless shot.

" ' Her name is Ama.' The old aunt hadn't moved or spoken for a long time, and though she still held my hand I had almost forgotten she was there. I turned and looked at her, not sure what she meant.

" ' Her name is Ama,' she said again, in her quiet brittle sounding voice. ' Each time she passes, I can feel the movement of your hand.'

" The party now was nearly over. The groups of men started to join up into a line, with the bridegroom at the head. Slowly they moved towards the doorway of the house, and as they went the line of girls followed them and merged until it was suddenly quiet and still and empty in the courtyard where I sat with the old woman at the table.

" ' I should go now,' I said. ' It is late.'

" The aunt didn't move or turn her head or make any reply. And I saw then that the party wasn't over yet. Not at least for me.

" The girl had come out of the shadows and was moving in small shuffling steps towards us. She clapped her hands softly, and soon she started on a halting, lilting song of infinite melancholy. She still had the scarlet cloth on her head that she had worn before, but the other things had gone and the only artifice on all the smooth yellow-coloured skin was a single chain of beads around her waist.

" ' Help me up.' The old woman pulled on my arm and stood up and, drawing me with her, she walked round to the front of the table.

" When the girl was close in front of us there, she sank to her knees in a boneless movement like the slow coiling of a spring.

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The song went on but softly now so that I could barely hear the words.

" The aunt raised my hand and put it against her cheek. 'I am going now,' she said. 'Thank you once again for the kindness that you did me.'

" She moved away stiffly and slowly, and one by one she turned down the lamps, until the only light in the courtyard was the distant brilliance of the stars and the only sound was the close faintness of the song. And soon that too came to an end.

" ' They are for you.'

" The voice seemed to come from a long way away, as if from the palms beyond the courtyard. But it was the girl's voice, I knew, and I looked down and saw that cupped in her hands were the beads that had been around her waist.

" ' Take them,' the voice said again. ' They are for you.' "

The man wheeled round suddenly away from the ship's rail, and ran his hands over his face as if to erase the scene from his eyes.

" I don't know why I told you that," he said. " I've never . . . " But how many times I thought have you told the story over and over again to yourself as you drove along those dusty empty African roads, or sat watching the stars or the trees in those bare lonely resthouses up and down the coast, or as you lay in your bed beside your wife.

" Don't worry," I said. " I'll never tell anyone else . . . "

I didn't see him the next day, but on the following day when I was sitting in the bar I saw him going past the window. I just saw his head, and beside it the ordered hair and thin rouged mouth of his wife. Neither of them looked in at the window and soon I lost sight of them. Five minutes later they went by again. It looked as if they were working up an appetite for lunch.

I finished my drink and went out on deck. I leaned on the rail with my back to the sea, and waited for them to come round again. I was curious to have another look at him. And at his wife.

Now after two days there was already a layer of unreality over that night when this man and I had sat up and talked. Both over the man himself and over the story he had told me. It didn't seem to fit the character of the person I had seen a few minutes before, walking with his wife along the deck.

When they came round again I had a good look at them. Again I had that impression of a dog on an invisible lead. When they passed the place where the map was, it was almost, for a small moment, as if there was a check and a pull on the lead as the man very slightly turned his head and glanced at the map, rather as a dog might look at the dampness on a lamp-post. The

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man himself had been spruced up for the pre-prandial walk as if for a provincial dog show, but not, one felt, as if there was in anybody's mind any question of winning a prize. His thin hair had been greased down to resist the breeze, his trousers were sharply creased, and he wore a red-spotted scarf neatly, too neatly, tucked into the open collar of his shirt. He had looked a more likeable creature, I thought, when I had found him at two in the morning in a crumpled dark blue shirt with wisps of hair over his face. Gone too was the birdlike eagernesss and the restless expressive movements of those large bony hands.

When they came close to me I smiled at him and said good morning. He hadn't noticed me standing there, and when he turned his head at the greeting I saw the surprise and then the recognition in his eyes. Our exchanged look lasted I suppose no more than a second before he turned away, but in that time I saw the processes of reason and instinct that operated in his mind. "If I return the greeting or seem to recognise this man," his mind said, "I will have to explain to my wife how and why and when." Instinct took over then and warned him of the dangers that lay in answering such questions. It was instinct in the end that turned his face away without any answering smile or words, and sent him on pacing down the deck.

I could almost hear his wife say, "Who was that?" And the answer, "Don't know. Never seen him before. Must have made a mistake." She might not believe him but her disbelief would be better than her questions.

I went back into the bar and had another drink . . .

A few days later I got off the boat at Gibraltar. I planned to stay there for a few days and go up to Granada, and then to take a train across Spain and France. I stayed at the Rock Hotel, but when I got back from the roses and the snow and the gipsies and the running water of Granada I found that the public lounge at the Rock, which when I had first arrived had so pleasantly and nostalgically reminded me of hotels in Bournemouth and Torquay, had lost its charm.

I went down towards the town and sat at a table in La Venta and watched the cabaret.

There was a girl dancing. She was about sixteen with a sullen sulky face and a harsh high voice when she sang that reminded me of the scraping together of grasshoppers' legs in the mating season. But she could certainly dance. When she had finished her dance my mouth felt dry. I turned to look for a waiter and another drink.

Two tables away, I saw then, there was a man sitting by himself.

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There was only one glass on the table but I waited for some time in case his wife should come in and join him. I didn't think however that she would. His hair obviously hadn't been combed since breakfast, and his shirt, his dark blue shirt, didn't look as if it had been ironed or washed for days.

"Hullo," I said in the end. "I didn't expect to find you here."

He looked at me for some time without saying anything. Then he smiled.

"Have a drink. I owe you several beers."

For half an hour we talked about the dancing, and different kinds of beer, and Granada and Spanish railway trains; and then quite suddenly he went back to what I had said when I first came across to his table.

"No," he said. "I didn't expect to be here either.

"I'm glad," he went on, "that we've met again. Because if it wasn't for you I wouldn't be here."

I stared at him and I wondered how long he had been sitting at this, or at other tables drinking on his own.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't quite understand . . ."

"Let's have another drink." He waved his hand at a waiter. He was slightly drunk.

"It's my turn," I said.

"Not really." But I could see he wasn't going to argue the point and I thought I knew why. I put my hand on his arm so that my question shouldn't offend him.

"Have you any money?"

He smiled again. "No, not much. How did you know?"

"Or luggage?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm here waiting for money to be sent to me at the bank."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I've found a place to stay. It used to be a sort of Toc H. But now it seems to be run privately by a nice old man. He says I can pay later on when my money arrives."

"So you just walked off the boat?"

"Yes," he said, smiling again. "I just walked off the boat."

Another cabaret turn came on then, and we sat drinking our beer and looking at the velvet bosoms and the artificial carnations and the legs slightly flecked with hair.

"I still don't see," I asked him, "how I come into it." I didn't want to ask too many questions, but the point worried me a bit.

"It's difficult to explain . . ." I remembered how he had said the same thing before, that night on the boat at two o'clock in the morning.

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"We were going to retire," he said. He said it as if it explained everything. When he saw my blank look he went on. "To Dorking . . . "

"Yes," I said. Some people, I knew, liked Dorking and places like that.

"The money should come tomorrow and then I'm going."

"I see." I still didn't understand what he meant and why he was here without his money, or his luggage or his wife.

"Do you think I'm mad?"

The question took me by surprise, the more so because it was already in my own mind.

"Yes. A bit . . . " I smiled, to make my answer meaningless. "Where are you going?"

"Where am I going?"

He now was the one who was surprised. I could see the look on his face. He started to explain but let it go and shook his head. Instead he put his hand in his pocket and took out a folder of papers and pushed them across the table.

I opened them out. They were lists of routes and dates and times and rates issued by a French shipping line. One page in particular had been well opened out and thumbed and in the margin in a small neat hand were figures and sums of adding and multiplication. A date had been ringed, and low down on the page a destination. And suddenly everything was clear. Or almost clear.

"I see," I said. "I see."

He reached across the table and gathered up the papers and put them back in his pocket.

"You won't ever tell anyone, will you?"

I shook my head, but I could see that he needed more than that. And whatever he needed he needed very much.

"No," I said.

But even that wasn't enough. He put his hand on my arm.

"All right," I said. "I promise."

"If my money comes in time," he went on, relaxed now and anxious to talk, "I'll go across to Tangier on the ferry and fly to Marseilles next Tuesday. The boat goes from there, you see, on Thursday."

The cabaret was over and most of the people in the room had gone. I paid the bill and walked with him to the place where he was staying. As we walked I wondered if there was anything I could do to stop him going to the Comoro Islands.

"How long ago was it?" I asked.

"Was what?" But he knew, of course, what I meant. We walked on . . .

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"Ten years," he said. "It was ten years ago."

"Ten years is a long time."

"Yes," he said. "I know."

We had reached his place now, and I knew already that there was nothing I could do. He had thought it all out. He had balanced his hopes and memories and needs against reality and Dorking, and he would go whatever I said.

"Good luck," I said.

"Thank you." He held on to my hand, as if it were the last link that joined him to his other life, and his other self, reluctant for a moment perhaps to cast it off for good. It gave me time to remember that there was still one question that he hadn't answered.

"What did you mean, by the way, when you said that if it hadn't been for me you wouldn't be here?"

"It was talking about it, that night on the boat, that made me decide to go."

"But you must have thought about it before many times."

"Yes. But it wasn't the same. When I told you the story . . . it somehow came alive again. I could smell the dusty sand in the courtyard. I could see the old aunt and hear her voice. I could feel her concern, and her caring and her understanding. I could see the girl dancing and kneeling and the cupped, outstretched hands, and the beads . . . "

"I don't think it had anything to do with me," I said. I knew that it was a mistake for him to go. That he wouldn't find what he was looking for. He would find palm trees, yes, and sand and the white teeth and pink tongues of friendly, casual, dark-skinned smiles and a quiet hut perhaps of thatch and sticks and a bed of plaited string. But how long would it last before he started smelling the smell of urine in the streets, and tired of cheap tasteless food and ticks and fleas and lice, and coral cuts that didn't heal . . .

"I don't think it had anything to do with me," I said again. "It was the map, wasn't it, that set you off?"

He had released my hand as if he sensed my thoughts and wanted to relieve me of my guilt, or to remove himself perhaps from the contagion of my doubts. He stood several paces from where I stood, and he was looking up at the stars, at Orion and Sirius and Vega.

He had cast off the last of the links now and he was thinking already of how these stars would look from the beaches and the hills and the reefs of the Comoros.

"Yes," he said. "I expect it was the map."

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*" Help me to help her—*
*there isn't much time"*

# THE QUIET PUPIL

## BY ELIZABETH LEMARCHAND

DESERTED school buildings at dusk are among the ghostliest places on earth.

There are slow tappings as draughts animate picture frames and maps. Notices rustle on noticeboards. Swing doors open just wide enough for an entrance or an exit, and close again with a little muted thump. Corridors elongate to infinity and are lined by ranks of shadows. The odd shoes, the blazers flung down, the random scatter of books suggest the panic evacuation of a host under the sudden impact of some catastrophic event.

I had come in at twilight on a February evening and reached the haven of the staff room. Switching on the electric light I found the essential book that I had forgotten to take home, and now I had to get out again. Admittedly I was often rather keyed up during my first year at Brilchester Girls' High School. A first post in a school of Brilchester's standing inevitably involved nervous tension. Ridiculous though it may sound, I stood for quite a long time nerving myself for the journey down the stairs.

Eventually I took the plunge, gripping the balustrade and keeping my eyes fixed on the hall which was lighter than the landing above. The High School had originated in a large, square Georgian house, the main staircase of which I was in the act of descending. In the course of time wings of a functional type had been added on both sides, containing form rooms and other teaching accommodation. On the ground floor these opened out of the front hall. As I came down, something moving in the East-wing corridor on my right, on the margin of my field of vision, impelled me to turn my head. I saw one of the girls going into a form room on her left, carrying a paper in her hand.

The impetus of my descent carried me halfway to the front door before my conscience brought me to a halt. I knew well that no girl should be in the school buildings after four thirty without special permission, and that it was my duty to investigate.

At the sight of another human being in the darkening and

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apparently empty building, my nervousness vanished without trace. I was now wrestling with my dislike of challenging a malefactor whom I might not recognise. I hated being at this humiliating disadvantage. Never very good at linking names and faces, I was finding considerable difficulty in doing so during my early days among Brilchester's four hundred girls.

However, determination to prove myself adequate in my job finally prevailed. I turned and hurried down the East corridor. Two form rooms opened off it on each side, while at the far end a door led to the Science Block. The rooms on the left housed the two School Certificate forms, known as SC.A and SC.B. I looked through the glass panels in the doors of each of these in turn. To my astonishment both were empty. The door leading to the laboratories was, as I expected, locked. Puzzled, I investigated the two form rooms on the opposite side. These were also empty. Finally, I returned to the SC form rooms, and went into each in turn, switching on the light. They contained no cupboards or odd corners and were indisputably empty, as far as any girl was concerned. Both had been cleaned, and their windows were fastened on the inside.

As I walked back to the front hall feeling rather at a loss, it suddenly sprang into light, and I heard the heavy tread of Bennett, the school caretaker, coming up from his semi-basement flat to lock the front door at six o'clock. It flashed through my mind that the girl must have contrived to double back while I hesitated, and to slip down the basement stairs which also led to the cloakrooms. The doors of the latter were bolted at four thirty, and therefore she would have had to leave one open on letting herself out.

Bennett would notice and report this: I felt relieved that final responsibility over the incident did not rest with me. I was still young and new enough to feel a little shy of the old-established school servants, and glad merely to return his cheerful good night, and go out of the front door without discussing the matter with him.

On the following day I kept my ears open in the staff room but heard no mention of a cloakroom door having been illegally opened, and no reference to it was made at the weekly staff meeting. I became progressively more reluctant to tell anyone about my experience, and finally relegated it to the back of my mind as an unsolved mystery. At the same time I remained completely convinced that I had seen one of the girls in the East corridor on that evening. The uniform white blouse had shown up distinctly under the dark gym slip, and my fleeting impression had been of a rather short figure with dark, bobbed hair. But

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I had no hope of identifying the girl: the distance in the fading light had been too great. I scrutinised SC.B closely when next I taught them, but could see no one who reminded me of her.

It was unusual at Brilchester for an inexperienced junior mistress to be entrusted with the work of an examination form. It had so happened that the senior history mistress had an exceptionally large number of university scholarship candidates, and she had explained to me that she could not fit SC.B into her timetable as well as SC.A.

"I'm quite sure that you'll make a splendid job of them, Miss Stanley," she said. "They're dears—everybody likes them—and above the average for the B stream. Of course, we shall be running parallel, and can see that we are covering much the same ground," she added tactfully.

I was very lucky to be working under Miss Henderson. She was not only an outstanding teacher herself, but most sympathetic towards a beginner's problems. As she had foretold, I found SC.B most likeable and responsive, and looked forward to my lessons with them. They struck me as an unusually united form, perhaps a little selfconsciously so, but it was an attractive trait. I took immense trouble over their work—the chief item in my weekly discussion with Miss Henderson.

The weeks slipped past and the mid-year examination timetable went up in the staff room. As I was not a form mistress, I had been put down for periods of invigilation in several forms, and was pleased to find that I was in charge of my own paper in SC.B. In due course I appeared in the doorway carrying the question papers, to be greeted with a chorus of groans and Cassandra-like predictions.

Having started the examination I relaxed momentarily at the supervisor's desk before starting to mark the set of scripts that I had brought with me. The miscellany of brown, gold, black, and red heads bent over papers made an attractive pattern, I thought idly.

As I sat contemplating them I was suddenly struck by something unusual: there was only one empty place. There were twenty-eight girls in SC.B, and every form room carried its full quota of thirty desks. I at once assumed that for some reason a girl from another form had been sent in to do her paper, and that through an oversight I had not been told to expect her.

I got up and began to stroll slowly between the rows of desks to see the visitor's name on the first page of her script. Elaine Heath had already contrived to drop her blotting-paper, and I retrieved it for her in passing. She looked up, an attractive redhead, and smiled her thanks.

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I went to the back of the room, glancing at each girl in turn, and began to retrace my steps, my eyes on the next row of desks. I halted abruptly. A girl whom I did not recognise was sitting at the desk ahead of me, and instead of a set of questions and sheets of lined paper, the music and words of a song lay open before her. My mind had barely registered this odd fact when Margaret Bland, at the desk in front of the stranger's, swung round and began to fill her fountain pen at its inkwell.

With a spasm of indescribable terror I became aware that I was watching the movements of Margaret's hands *through* the dark head of the girl with the song. Then there was recognition of the dark, bobbed hair above the white blouse, and the mounting horror of musical notation and printed words seen through the body of a child . . . *Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney-sweepers* . . . read my fascinated, unwilling eyes. I seemed to be outside the orderly chronological sequence of events: there was an intolerable superimposition of terrors. I felt myself disintegrating under it.

A slight sound, a little in front of me and to my left, was the lifeline which drew me back into the safety of the normal world. I looked up to see Elaine Heath staring at me with fixed intentness, her expression an extraordinary compound of dismay and relief. I looked straight into her eyes, and in that moment we achieved the intimacy of those who have shared an experience of intense emotional content. Then, embarrassed, she blushed and began to scribble hastily. I paused a moment longer by the empty desk, and then returned, trembling, to my own.

I sat and pretended to work, I had only one coherent aim: to gain time to think. To my relief, the roar of pent-up conversation which burst forth as soon as I had taken in the scripts made it a simple matter to slip away without catching Elaine's eye.

Somehow I managed to get through the high-pressure period of correcting examination papers, balancing marks, and writing reports with reasonable competence, and to recognise my opportunity when it came. Miss Henderson suggested that we should look through my sets of scripts together. SC.B had done creditably. "These are most encouraging," she said. "You've brought them on so well."

"I'm very glad you think they are all right. Of course," I went on rather tentatively, "even two less in a form is a help. Have they always been below strength?"

"Oh no," she answered. "One girl left only last July when her father was moved to London. And the Greenford tragedy was just over a year ago."

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I looked at her questioningly.

"Hasn't anyone mentioned it? How surprising! It just shows how quickly the past fades out of people's minds. It was an appalling thing: a car accident on the way to the school concert at the end of the Christmas term. Judith was taking part, and we always thought that they may have been hurrying to get her here in good time. She and her father were killed outright. Her mother eventually recovered, poor woman. Judith was an only child."

"What an awful shock for SC.B," I said.

"Yes, quite shattering. They're a musical lot and were singing in the concert. Mercifully the news didn't come through until it was over. Poor little Elaine Heath nearly had a nervous breakdown. She was Judith's particular friend."

There was a pause. Miss Henderson took up another set of scripts. "Let's just glance through these and then you must hurry home and have an early night, my dear. You look tired out."

I was. I longed for the respite the end of term would bring, and I seemed to go through the remaining days like an automaton. I sensed that Elaine understood my reluctance to discuss our mutual experience in the examination room. With the sensitiveness that I came to know as an essential part of her, she made no attempt to have any private conversation with me.

When the school reassembled early in May, the look of strain on Elaine's face made me feel both selfish and conscience-stricken. I invited her to tea at my rooms on the first Sunday of term. She ate very little, and I was glad to clear away the tea things and settle her in a comfortable chair, opposite mine.

"Elaine," I said, without preamble, "let's talk."

She gave me a grateful look.

"I want to, awfully," she said.

At first my part was merely to listen. It was obvious that the realisation that I, too, had seen Judith had been an enormous relief after the initial shock.

"At first I kept forgetting she'd died, and when I saw her in school it seemed quite natural, just for a second. Then I'd remember and . . . well, she just wasn't there any more. Sometimes I've been a bit worried in case I was . . . going a bit queer."

I asked if Judith had ever spoken to her.

"No, not exactly. I heard her singing in the form room one day, and just got a glimpse of her as I came in. I'd know her voice anywhere. We used to stand next to each other in Prayers."

"Have you ever seen her outside school?"

"No, never. Always in the form room or where the form goes. The others don't see her . . . only you."

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We fell silent. I watched Elaine's nervous fingers pleating and unpleating the frill of a cushion cover.

"It's July I'm worried about," she suddenly burst out. "What's going to happen to Judy then, when the form's all broken up into the Lower Sixths and a lot of us have left?"

I experienced a sense of bleakness that was physically chilling.

"I can't help wondering—" she began desperately, and then her voice trailed off, and she turned her face away.

"Wondering what?" I said, with mounting uneasiness.

"If I ought to—to leave her quite alone."

In a moment of time I saw long-term possibilities that appalled me. It seemed an immense interval before I heard my voice saying, quite calmly and objectively, "You mean, stay on at school yourself, instead of having your year in Lausanne?"

Still with her face averted she gave a small, involuntary start at hearing her secret plan put into words. Then she nodded. I began to feel my way, inch by inch, with breathless caution.

"I can't think of anything *less* likely to help her than that," I said.

Her surprise made her turn and face me.

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Don't you think people ought to begin to outgrow school in their last year?"

"Yes, of course, but—"

"Well, it's just as true for Judy. You surely don't think she's doomed to go on being in SC.B for ever, just because of a motor accident?"

I watched the thoughts passing through her mind.

"You can't know people go on growing after they're dead," she said.

"I can," I answered, "because if they didn't it would be horribly unjust, and God wouldn't allow it."

There was another long silence. Then she suddenly leaned towards me, and put her hand in mine.

"Help me to help her, then. There isn't much time."

"Of course I will," I said, without the faintest vestige of an idea in my mind as to how to set about it.

The way that unexpectedly opened up a week or so later was not the result of any inspiration of mine.

One morning Miss Braithwaite, SC.B's form mistress, was taken ill and rushed to hospital, where she underwent a serious operation.

After some difficult days of improvisation in school the Head Mistress sent for me. She looked worried and tired. "Miss Stanley," she said, "do you think that you could possibly

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manage to take on Miss Braithwaite's form? I haven't a spare senior mistress to put in, and Miss Henderson tells me that you get on so happily and well with SC.B. I'm afraid there's no hope of Miss Braithwaite's returning until September, if then."

SC.B were genuinely sorry about Miss Braithwaite, but they were young and could not help enjoying the interest and excitement of a new form mistress, or resist the temptation to dramatise the situation. After I had dismissed them at the end of my first afternoon in my new post, a group clustered round my desk to chat. Naomi Clinton looked at me soulfully with enormous blue eyes.

"It's simply wonderful having you, Miss Stanley," she mooed, "but of course Miss Braithwaite's going like this is the beginning of the end, you know."

"What end?" I asked, unhelpfully, amid a chorus of mournful assent.

"The end of *us*," said someone dramatically.

"Of SC.B," explained the form prefect with grave courtesy. "Only a few more weeks together, and then it's over, for the rest of our lives."

"Shall I tell you something about myself?" I asked. They brightened perceptibly, confidences from Authority being very sweet to the young. "One of the characters in fiction I most dislike," I went on, raising my head and looking down the middle row of desks, "is Peter Pan. Just take that home in your satchels and think it over, will you?"

I stood up and extricated myself amid a momentarily baffled silence. The form prefect leapt to the door and opened it for me. As I left, a babel broke out behind me.

It was my only inspiration, so I proceeded to develop it. Perhaps, I thought, if I can help them to grow out of this rather overdeveloped form-consciousness before the end of term, the atmosphere which surrounds it will disintegrate and no longer hold Judy . . . There were other times when I had grave qualms. Was I encouraging Elaine, a girl for whom I was professionally responsible, in a highly undesirable fantasy? But my absolute conviction of the reality of the situation always reasserted itself in the end. I found, too, that I took it for granted that Judy was as much in my care as any of the others. Seen in this light her problem lost its sense of oddness, and became just a form matter to be dealt with.

I worked hard on SC.B, feverishly mastering the details and prospects of possible careers, and going to the length of discussing clothes, hair styles, and young men. I enlarged on the attractions

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and relative freedom of the continental finishing schools and training colleges to which some of the leaving girls were going. For the first time in my life I entertained warm feelings towards the School Certificate Examination. As it drew nearer individuals became more and more absorbed in their own work and prospects, and less prone to indulge in group sentimentality. I could see the first signs of the dissolution of my small community. But I could see, too, that Elaine was beginning to worry again.

One afternoon as I was walking home after school she materialised at my elbow. "Miss Stanley," she said, "do you think we've grown up at all this term?"

It was not the question which she had come to ask, but I answered it. "Some people have, quite a lot. You, for one."

"It's all thanks to you, anyway. We . . . we shall know if Judy's all right, shan't we?"

"I'm certain we shall," I said, with a much greater confidence than I felt.

After our ways had diverged, I returned to this problem which was beginning to loom uncomfortably large in my mind. I should never feel safe about Elaine unless she was completely convinced of Judy's peace and happiness after SC.B had ceased to be an entity. Suppose Judy were an ordinary child in the form, I thought, and I wanted an assurance of some kind from her. I should just ask her for it . . . I felt rather unsure of myself, and even selfconscious, but could think of no other course of action.

The school year was coming up to its peak. Many of the staff worked on the premises until late, and the obliging Bennett postponed his final locking-up accordingly.

About half past nine one evening I put down my pen and went quietly out of the staff room with its litter of examination scripts and report forms and its absorbed and hectic workers. This time the gathering shadows held no terrors. The East corridor stretched away into the dusk, and was empty. I passed down it to the door of SC.B and went in.

The room had been cleaned and closed up for the night, and the scent of roses from a bowl on the table hung in the silent airlessness like a cloud. I walked over to the flowers and stood looking down at them, with my back to the desks. There were little sounds of work going on: a page being turned, a line ruled, a pen laid down.

"Judy," I said, speaking gently, but with the faintest inflexion of authority, as to a child one didn't know very well. "It's been lovely having you in my form, and thank you for staying

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on with me, although I was a stranger to you. Of course, I know that you're one of the people who are ready for the next stage now, but I do want Elaine to be sure that you are, too. You see, as she's leaving she might worry about you. You will make her understand, won't you?"

It was a charming little voice, clear and resonant. "Yes, Miss Stanley," it said. "Thank you for telling me. Good night, Miss Stanley."

"Good night, Judy." I went to the door without looking back.

I decided to say nothing to Elaine. I was quite confident now, and felt that the unexpected would carry greater conviction.

The last day of term eventually arrived. We had rather a ragged morning, mainly occupied in the interminable taking in and checking of sets of text-books and songs and games equipment. The girls came and went like ants with consignments for various destinations, until at last everything had been cleared. In the afternoon we sat together in the Assembly Hall, for the long, official breaking-up with its lists and valetes.

The end of a school year has a poignant finality, and we trooped back to the form room rather silently. Amid its unnatural tidiness, its empty bookshelves, and flowerless vases stacked on the window-sills, the form prefect's halting little speech and the illegal present they forced upon me brought me very near to tears myself.

"Well, good-bye, and good luck to you all," I said finally. "Anyway," I glanced round the bare room, "we've left the camp site in perfect order."

This raised a laugh, and lightened the atmosphere. One by one they collected their remaining belongings, shook hands with me, and went, until only Elaine was left. The next step seemed to come quite naturally.

"Good-bye, Judy. God bless you," I said, still standing by my desk.

A tiny breeze stirred the air. The swing door opened just wide enough for someone to pass through, and closed again with a little, muted thump. An exclamation from Elaine made me turn sharply. She indicated a paper lying on the table. I went over to it, and once again stood looking down at Vaughan Williams' setting of the song for Fidele. Elaine joined me.

"This is what the form sang at the Christmas concert, isn't it?" I asked.

She nodded, serenely triumphant through her tears.

"She wants it returned to the Music Library now," she said.

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# Rooshian Bear

by PADRAIG O'CIORDHUAIN

WHEN my flesh was too tender for the strap and mind unripe for moral argument, my grandfather, Michael John O'Boyle, tried to keep me well-behaved by the threat of the Rooshian Bear.

If he caught me stoning my enemy, the butting goat, or chasing the silly hens he would wave his stick and cry, " Will you stop that now, you young devil, or do I have to be calling the Rooshian Bear? "

From the spelling you will see that he spoke the words country-fashion and it was this maybe that made the creature sound so huge and ominous.

Michael John was an old soldier, a Crimean veteran, and he had named his children after the various battles he had fought in—John Charles Sebastopol O'Boyle and so forth. One of my uncles he had christened Aloysius Inkerman, but this lad had emigrated himself as soon as possible to the United States, where he doubtless changed it for he was never heard of again. Anyway, from all accounts he was the kind of rascal that every family has, however respectable, and doesn't speak about.

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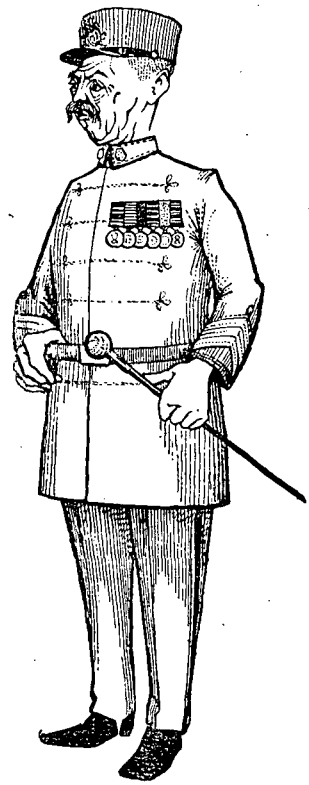
Inkerman, he said, was called the Soldiers' Battle because of the desperate way they fought it, hand-to-hand at the bayonet point; but it was in the trenches at Sebastopol that they suffered the most from the bitter cold, the hunger and disease. And it was there before the Great Redoubt that he was wounded and had the fateful meeting with the bear.

In the wars of those days the shells could be seen coming, enormous ones that burst with a terrible clatter in the air above, flinging hundreds of deadly round bullets whizzing and buzzing in all directions. On this occasion my grandfather saw one of these devil's engines sailing through the air towards him, and to save the eyes he flung up his arm over his face. He was a left-handed man, a "Kithy," so it was his left arm he thrust up to save the eyes.

The shrieking contraption burst and one of the bullets pierced the green regimental facings on the sleeve of his scarlet coat, lodging fast in the arm just above the wrist. As he was half dead with the cold and hunger anyway, he was carried off to the hospital at Scutari where he was nursed by Miss Florence Nightingale. He always swore it was this noble female woman who saved his life, and he never went to Mass or confession without lighting a candle and saying a prayer for the repose of her soul.



A surgeon in the hospital probed the wound to get the bullet out, but the poor man had drink taken and bungled the job. Not that my grandfather blamed him, the way things were with all the hundreds and hundreds of dead and dying. The surgeon took out the bits of green cloth from the arm but left the bullet in.

After the healing of the wound and my grandfather home long years from the wars, the bullet worked its way down until it settled as a kind of lump in the palm of his hand. Then one day while he was

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shaving, the skin parted revealing the bullet where the lump had been; so once again my grandfather was hurried off to the hospital, where the hand was photographed as a medical curiosity before the missile was scientifically extracted once and for all.

When Vaughan, the photographer, decorated his window with the picture of the hand with a bullet in it, a crowd always gathered to see it and express their wonder . . .

A man on sentry-go had to watch out for his life in the trenches at Sebastopol. If a soldier so much as lit his pipe to take solace and warm his hands in frosty dark the Rooshian sharp-shooters would spot the glow of it and shatter the pipe in the man's mouth. Sometimes of course they missed the pipe and blew the man's brains out.

It was on one of these bitter cold nights that the Rooshian Bear came lumbering over the snow by the light of the moon to the trench where my grandfather stood on guard. It reared up in a great rage on its hind legs high above him, waving its huge hairy paws and rolling its little red pig-eyes.

"Where's young Patrick?" growled the bear to my grandfather. When Michael John was telling me the story he would growl the words with a foreign Russian accent just like the bear itself, and I would tremble and huddle close to him.

"He's at home with his mother to be sure," said my grandfather. Later, of course, I came to realise that this could not have been so, for neither myself nor my mother indeed were born at the time; but while Michael John was telling it I never doubted a word. Yet for all my grandfather's soft talk the bear kept on growling and giving out about me: "Is he behaving himself or is he throwing stones at the goat and turf-sods at the hens?"

At this point I became very alarmed indeed, for it was clear that the bear was in some kind of league with that damned goat, although what truck it could want with a daft lot of hens was beyond me entirely. Even though my grandfather swore black was blue I was doing neither of these things, he couldn't pacify the bear.

"Tell him," the bear kept on growling, "if he doesn't keep out of mischief I'll be over there myself and I'll grab him between my paws and c-r-r-ush him until every bone in his body c-r-r-acks." As the story finished I was thankful indeed it was Michael John's arms I was in and he shielding me from the Rooshian Bear.

The great day for my grandfather was pension day. He had ended his service with the colours with "permission to retain

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his rank and uniform," so he always wore full regimentals when he went to draw his pension.

The dark blue pill-box cap had a shiny black leather peak to it, and the frock-coat of the same colour fastened smoothly down the front with dozens of invisible hooks and eyes. He carried a silver-knobbed swagger cane with a harp and shamrocks and the motto of his regiment stamped in Latin on it; and there were gold stripes on his arms and red stripes down his trouser-legs, and bronze and silver medals on his chest.

The medal with the likeness of the old Queen Victoria on it had been awarded him for "good conduct," and he never failed to hold me up so I could take a good close look at it. Then he would put me down, stick out his little finger for me to hang on to, and together we'd set forth for the town.

There were other old soldiers in the town but none was the equal of my grandfather in battles, rank, or service, so he was listened to with great attention when he went off to Lynch's Select Bar to talk and smoke and drink on the pension money.

While they were inside at their stout and whiskey I was put to sit on a bench outside, facing the main square where the beasts were sold on fair-days. As a treat I was given a bottle of fizzing brown lemonade.

It was this same damned bottle that brought the Rooshian Bear to the town that day and gave me the fright that so stunted my growth that in all my life I never notched an inch beyond the six-foot mark.

The way the lemonade bottle was constructed was very clever. It was stoppered with a green glass ball held in place by a red rubber ring. When the glass ball was pressed down it was caught in a groove in the neck of the bottle so that the lemonade was able to fizz up without the mouth being blocked by the ball again. These bottles were so costly to make that my grandfather had to pay a halfpenny charge in case I broke one or didn't bring it back.

"Mind you take care now and don't go breaking that bottle," said my grandfather, "for there's a halfpenny on it, and for a halfpenny I can buy a twist of snuff when you're done with it."

So I sat in the sun swigging at the lemonade and rattling the glass ball in the bottle and wondering and scheming how I could get it out, for to speak the truth I would rather have had the glass ball than the lemonade itself. I had just become a passionate marbles player and longed for nothing in the world beyond eminence in the finer points of the game. And if only I had the glass ball, with a single flick of the thumb I could be certain of knocking any other marble whatever its weight out of

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any ring in the parish and of scattering the common pot ones like scared chicks north, south, east, and west.

So after a while with the lemonade drunk and I sitting there dreaming in the sun, the bottle slipped from my grasp to the hard stone flags, but it only bounced with a ringing noise leaving my monster of a marble still prisoned inside.

So again after a while I clambered up on the bench and once more the bottle slipped from my clutch, and this time from the greater height there was no mistake about it. The bottle smashed into pieces and my glass ball went hopping and rattling away down the hard stone flags. Filled with joy, and the half-penny charge clean forgotten, I was down from the bench and after it.

But no sooner did I have it fast in my palm than I heard the growl and I knew the Rooshian Bear had come.

And there it was sure enough, huge and hairy and with the red pig-eyes, lumbering towards me over the cobbles of the square. And with it were two strangers with beards and peak caps and baggy trousers tucked into high boots. Rooshians! And the very men no doubt my grandfather had fought with at Alma, Inkerman, and Sebastopol.

One of the Rooshians was leading the bear with a pole that had a ring on it that passed through the creature's snout, while the other fellow was carrying a queer kind of wooden banjo shaped like a triangle. And I stood there too petrified even to whimper; but when the one with the queer-looking banjo struck a note and the bear reared up, rolling its red pig-eyes and stamping its hind legs and waving its great hairy paws in time to the tune, I let a screech out of me that would have drowned the blasts of any two trains in the barony.

"In the name of all that's good and holy, what is it ails you, young Patrick?" cried my grandfather, snatching me up in his arms as he ran out from Lynch's with his cronies behind him.

"The Bear," I yelled, pointing at the animal. "The Rooshian Bear!"

At that when he saw the brute Grandfather began to roar and laugh, and I had to hammer at the man's face with my fists to bring him to his senses and make him see the danger I was in. And even then he wouldn't have it, like the old fool he was.

"It's not come to harm you at all, my treasure," he kept on saying. "Why should it, and you that's behaved like a little angel all day long?" Maybe he didn't know I hadn't, but I did and it was damned certain the bear did, for I still had the glass ball stuck in my fist.

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" Let's go from here," I shrieked. " Or it'll tear me asunder."

" That it will not," the old fool snickered. " Look it, isn't the poor creature just trying to please you, dancing on its hind legs to the instrument?" And he tried to hold me up to look at the brute over the heads of the men and women that had gathered to watch the performance, but I wasn't having it at all and I wriggled myself free and ran from that place faster than any man or beast could hope to.

Half the town was out looking for me but it was late when they found me where I'd hidden in the nuns' hay-barn. They were laughing and joking but my grandfather was so concerned that there was never any mention of the bottle or the halfpenny on it, and even after when he caught me beating the hell out of that informer of a goat with the longest stick I could find he said never a word about the Rooshian Bear save that it had gone back to Sebastopol, having lost interest in me on account of my good behaviour.

When Michael John died there was the biggest turn-out for the funeral ever seen in the town, not counting the Archbishop's, of course. The *de Profundis*, *Domine* and Mass-cards for the dead at the chapel; whiskey and slaintes to the living in the pub.

And in a queer kind of way, after I'd had a couple of jars I wouldn't have been at all surprised to see the Rooshian Bear standing there among us, waving a glass in its great hairy paws and growling a valediction to old Michael John.

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# Altmark INCIDENT

There occurred in February, 1940, the *Altmark* incident, which partly because the land war in Europe at that time hung fire, attracted much notice in the press.

***Philip Vian, Action This Day***

## DESTROYER SWOOPS ON HELL SHIP

The German hell-ship *Altmark* in whose foul holds lie three hundred British seamen captured by the *Graf Spee* in the South Atlantic, is today dodging in Norwegian waters with a British destroyer waiting to pounce on her the moment she sails into the open sea . . .

***Daily Mirror, 17 February 1940***

## ALTMARK YOUR OBJECTIVE

On the fifteenth February nearly twenty-five years ago, Captain Vian in *Cossack*, commanding a naval force which included the cruiser *Arethusa* and four Fleet destroyers, was sweeping the North Sea for German iron-ore ships on the Narvik run. He received an Admiralty signal reporting that the *Altmark* had been sighted passing Bergen. A further signal said bluntly : *Altmark your objective. Act accordingly*.

*Cossack*'s forces swept north through the long night, the Commander more than a little distrait ; there was an unexpected volume of shipping in the Leads, the background, black and snow, made visibility uncertain, it would be easy to miss the objective . . .

Salvation was provided by a young officer in *Arethusa*. His keen eyes detected, far away, a shadow passing close to, and interrupting the black and white land background, and, significantly, the mast and funnels of a torpedo-boat, which must be a Norwegian escort.

Acting on a policy signal from the Admiralty, which had said that interception might be carried out, if necessary, in neutral waters, *Arethusa*'s Captain Q. D. Graham sent the destroyers in. *Altmark*, however, disregarded their signals to stop, and was assisted by Norwegian torpedo-boats—there were now seen to be two—who ranged along on either side, preventing the destroyers from boarding. Abreast Josing Fjord *Altmark* turned hard to port, increased speed, and headed through the narrow entrance ; the Norwegians closed in behind her, blocking the channel. Such was

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the position when *Cossack* arrived, just as darkness fell. If there were no prisoners on board, the Norwegian action had been correct : but if there were ? . . . *Cossack* hailed *Kjell*, the senior Norwegian, and invited the Captain aboard.

. . . I said that whatever he might think, British prisoners were, in fact, on board *Altmark* ; and I demanded the right to visit and search, asking him to come with me. In his reply he stated that the German ship had been examined three times since her entry into Norwegian waters, and that no prisoners had been found. His instructions were to resist entry by force : as I might see, his ships had their torpedo-tubes trained on *Cossack*. Deadlock. I then asked the Admiralty for further instructions.

Within three hours the Admiralty reply had been deciphered : it was very clear, and its phrasing suggested that the First Lord, Mr. Churchill, had had a hand in its composition : *Unless Norwegian torpedo-boat undertakes to convoy Altmark to Bergen with a joint Anglo-Norwegian guard on board and a joint escort, you should board Altmark, liberate the prisoners and take possession of the ship pending further instructions. If Norwegian torpedo-boat interferes, you should warn her to stand off. If she fires upon you, you should not reply unless attack is serious . . . Suggest to Norwegian destroyer that honour is served by submitting to superior force.*

Time had become a factor of importance, since the intervention of German aircraft might be expected at daylight. Having placed *Cossack* in a position from which our pom-pom guns could play upon Norwegian decks, whilst their torpedo-tubes were no instant menace to us, I said we could parley no longer, and must board and search *Altmark* forthwith, whether we fought them or not. *Kjell*'s captain decided that honour was served by submitting to superior force and withdrew. On rounding the bend in the fjord, *Altmark* at last came into view. She lay bows inshore, encased in ice, her great bulk standing black against the snow-clad mountains.

Thoughts of the 6-inch guns with which the *Altmark* was said to be armed were naturally in our minds. Though our own guns were manned we were obviously an easy target, and the enemy's first shots might well immobilise us at once. There was nothing for it, however, but to go ahead and get to grips as quickly as possible.

The *Altmark* captain was determined to resist being boarded. On sighting *Cossack*, he trained his searchlight on our bridge to blind the command, and came astern at full power through the channel which his entry into the ice had made. His idea was to ram us. Unless something was done very quickly the great mass of the tanker's counter was going to crash heavily into the *Cossack*'s port bow.

There followed a period of manœuvring in which disaster . . . was avoided by the skill of my imperturbable navigator, Maclean, and by the speed with which the main engine manœuvring valves were operated by their artificers.

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Lieutenant Bradwell Turner, the leader of the boarding party, anticipated *Cossack*'s arrival alongside *Altmark* with a leap which became famous. Petty-Officer Atkins, who followed him, fell short, and hung by his hands until Turner heaved him on deck. The two quickly made fast a hemp hawser from *Cossack*'s forecastle. and the rest of the party scrambled across . . .

It was now clear that as a result of her manœuvre *Altmark* would ground by the stern, which she did, but not before *Cossack*, the boarding party all transferred. had cast off, to avoid the same fate.

***Philip Vian, Action This Day***

The prisoners in the holds had sunk into deep apathy. So much had been happening for more than twenty-four hours and it had made no difference to their plight. But now a low, ominous scraping sound almost sent the trunkway look-out headlong down the ladder ; it brought the inert prisoners to their feet. The noise came from the after end of the ship.

" She's run aground," said Smith above the confused mutterings. " If she holes we've had it down here. We'll die like rats."

***Willi Frischauer and Robert Jackson, The Navy's Here***

Resistance overcome, Turner was able to turn to the business of the day. The prisoners were under locked hatches in the holds : when these had been broken open Turner hailed the men below with the words, " Any British down there ? "

He was greeted with a tremendous yell of, " Yes ! We're all British ! "

" Come on up then," said Turner. " The Navy's here ! "

***Philip Vian, Action This Day***

**WELCOME HOME**

The grey port of Leith was the scene yesterday of one of the proudest incidents in the war, when nearly three hundred officers and men of the Merchant Navy rescued from the *Altmark* set foot again on British soil . . .

Dockyard workers stood side by side with senior officers of the Navy and the Army to welcome the *Cossack* and the men she saved. It was all very friendly and informal but for one brief ceremony when the official party was piped on board to congratulate Captain Vian . . .

***The Times, 19 February 1940***

Their rescue at the moment when these unhappy men were about to be delivered over to indefinite German bondage proves that the long arm of British sea-power can be stretched out, not only for foes, but also for faithful friends. And to Nelson's signal of one hundred and thirty-five years ago, *England expects that every man will do his duty*, there may now be added last week's not less proud reply : *The Navy's here.*

**WINSTON CHURCHILL**

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**What has haunted the soldier at war since history began?**

# SECRET WEAPON

## By ROBERT STANDISH

MISS GUMBOYLE," said Oscar Grubb, my agent, doing the honours, "let me introduce Walter Zeal—*the* Walter Zeal, the famous biographer, you know. If I can persuade him to interest himself in your problem, your worries are over.

"I should tell you, Walter," he added, turning to me, "that Miss Gumboyle—" What a name for such a lovely girl!—"is the grand-daughter of General Sir Reginald Gumboyle, K.C.B., K.C.S.I., K.C.M.G., to say nothing of other honours bound to be showered upon him when his remarkable scientific achievements are made known to the world . . ."

As we shook hands, it seemed as though an electric shock ran up my right arm. I tried to mumble something suitable.

The girl was almost too luscious to be true. I knew at a glance that the world had not soiled her and I resolved, in less time than it takes to say so, that while I breathed she should be protected from all evil. If she had asked me to do so, I would have lain down on Oscar Grubb's fake oriental rug and let her walk over me wearing stiletto heels. She made me wish I'd led a better life.

"I don't want to *tell* you anything about my grandfather's wonderful achievements, Mr. Zeal," she said in a bell-like voice. "You must see everything for yourself. He is a great man, Mr. Zeal—truly great. In the face of difficulties which would have daunted a lesser man, he has won through to triumph . . ."

I glanced at her narrowly, because that sounded suspiciously like a line pinched from one of my biographies. It's one of my favourites.

"He is an old man, Mr. Zeal," she continued, "a gallant soldier who has devoted his life to the service of his country and now, as the shadows lengthen, he is entitled to bask for a little time in the sunshine of public recognition and esteem . . ."

This was terrible. It was me at my worst.

"Would you care to give me some idea of the—er—nature of your grandfather's achievements, Miss Gumboyle?" I asked.

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"It would be best, Mr. Zeal—that is, if you could spare the time—for you to come down to stay with us for a few weeks while you formed your own independent conclusions. We live a simple life, far from the madding crowd, but you would be very welcome."

I was practically on my way and for three reasons. First, there was the prospect of eating regularly. The flower of my genius tends to shed its petals without food. Second, even if nothing else were achieved, I would cure her of talking in the way I wrote. Third and lastly, when I contemplated some other dreary hacks that Oscar Grubb had on his books, it became my duty not to allow any one of them to spend weeks with her in the intimacy of a country house. We shook hands on it and agreed that on the following day I would go down to Wimpole Priory.

The next hour was spent persuading Oscar to advance me enough to get my typewriter out of hock and to buy another shirt. I owed him enough already to give him a vested interest in my survival, so he might have done the thing with better grace while he was about it.

Miss Gumboyle—Susan, as I was soon to call her—met me at the station. Wimpole Priory was indeed "far from the madding crowd." Over the ancient stone archway at the entrance were carved the Gumboyle arms with the family motto *Cum Grano Salis*, of which during the ensuing weeks I was destined to realise the aptitude. If you did not learn Latin, it is not for me to presume to teach you. But the loss is yours.

A guide book calls Wimpole Priory "a gem of Tudor architecture, with the almost unique distinction that there is at no time any record of Queen Elizabeth having slept there." Susan showed me to a charming chintzy bedroom, low-beamed and smelling of lavender and old lace. The leaded window was framed by clematis. To me, living in an atmosphere compounded of cigarette butts, stale beer, and fried onions, it was heaven. Before I was left to my unpacking, a cuckoo sounded off in an elm across the lawn, prompting Susan to pinch Spenser's line about "the merry cuckoo, messenger of Spring." Something would have to be done about it . . .

Over tea and crumpets I met General Sir Reginald Gumboyle, a magnificent old ruin with a fine leonine head, shaggy brows, and steady blue eyes. He carried the wound scars of four wars and in *Who's Who?* admitted to eighty-four years. It was this last which raised uncomfortable doubts in my mind, for I am persuaded that the number of new scientific discoveries made by retired octogenarian generals is not impressive.

After tea he led me into a paddock surrounded by a high

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wire fence and topped with electrified barbed wire. At the four corners were floodlights, while two ferocious bull-mastiffs patrolled the perimeter.

I don't know what I expected to find inside the enclosure, but what I saw was a number of somewhat drab-looking birds, which clung to the ground in the manner of guinea-fowl and had much the same colouring.

" Are they all the same breed? " I asked, feeling I had to say something. " I notice that some have straight beaks and others hooked . . ."

" I like a man who uses his powers of observation," said the General with a toothy smile. " You and I will get along well together."

Thus encouraged, I remarked, " They've got lots of breast meat, too. Should be fine table birds."

" If that was meant to be funny," snapped the old soldier. " I don't find it so."

Those birds made me feel uncomfortable. There was a nasty, sly, knowing look in their beady little eyes and I did not like the way they cocked their heads in a listening attitude.

" If they're not being bred for the table, General," I said, " what are they being bred for? "

" A good question that, my boy," he replied more amiably. " But instead of replying to it, I'll give you a demonstration. Marmaduke," he called to a fat, torpid bird hovering in the foreground, " this is Mr. Walter Zeal. Go with him into the meadow and he will give you a message for me." To me he added, " Remember to speak slowly and distinctly."

Well, if that damned bird didn't understand what had been said, he gave a very lifelike imitation, for he jumped on to my shoulder and we went out into the meadow together.

" Marmaduke," I began, feeling like a fool, " will you please present my compliments to the General and tell him that at this time I usually take my first drink of the evening. I'd like a good two fingers of Scotch, some plain water, and no ice. Got that? "

Well, bless my hob-nailed liver if Marmaduke didn't lollop off my shoulder and fly straight to the house. Taking my time, I followed him. I found the General in the library, a feature of which was the entire absence of books. He waved an arm towards a silver tray on which stood a decanter of whisky, a jug of water, and a tumbler.

" Help yourself, my dear fellow," he said hospitably. " I think you said no ice . . ."

So overcome was I that I poured three fingers of Scotch

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instead of two. "You've seen and heard nothing yet, my boy," said my host. "Wait until tomorrow. Meanwhile, if you will excuse me, I'm going to bed. Susan will play hostess. Good night."

The dinner was first rate. The glass and silver sparkled and there were no daubs of dried mustard on the plates. Susan sat at the head of the table and did her stuff with a mixture of condescension and grace. When we retired to the drawing-room, she seemed nervous, as though doubtful of my intentions. Was she a mind-reader?

When I questioned her about Marmaduke, she asked whether I liked music. She then beat the stuffing out of a grand piano. I resolved there and then that we would not have a piano in our house—or a dictionary of quotations.

The General and I breakfasted together. Susan did not appear. Fortified by a grilled kipper, scrambled eggs, sausages, and the usual trimmings, we went to the enclosure where those sly birds were kept.

"General," I said, coming to the point, "who and what is Marmaduke?"

"He's a Pigot, my boy."

"I've never heard of such a breed," I said.

"Nor has anyone else. But they will. Mark my words, they will."

"What is a Pigot?" I demanded.

"A good question that, my boy!" replied the old soldier, who was obviously enjoying my bewilderment. "Future generations of ornithologists will, I hope, call the breed the Pigot Gumboylius . . ."

"But what *are* they?" I persisted.

"Don't rush me, my dear fellow," retorted the General. "The Pigot, as I have named the breed, is a cross between the West African talking parrot and the ordinary European carrier, or homing pigeon. My original intention was to revolutionise wartime telecommunications. Don't forget that I began my experiments before there was any such thing as two-way radio-telephony which, although I hate to admit it, is a more reliable means of communication in the field. Nevertheless, in certain kinds of open warfare, I am still convinced that there is a role for birds trained to deliver messages verbally.

"Marmaduke, whom you met last evening, represents thirty years of intensive study, experimentation, and selective breeding . . . all without the smallest official help or encouragement. Ornithologists said it was impossible—said that even if I succeeded in breeding a cross it would be a hybrid, like a mule,

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without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity. Look, my boy, see for yourself . . ."

As the old soldier spoke, a hen Pigot, with her brood of young, clucked contentedly past us on the way to the feeding troughs.

"Impossible!" snorted the General. "I was brought up in the tradition that nothing is impossible. But it wasn't easy, so don't think it was. The trick was to establish any kind of compatibility between parrots and pigeons. Climate had a lot to do with it. Pigeons mate in the spring and early summer. Parrots, being equatorial birds, have never heard of spring. I tried keeping them in a heated aviary. The parrots loved it, of course, but the pigeons moulted and moped. Then I took them to West Africa. When I turned the pigeons loose for a bit of exercise, the whole damn lot flew back to England. It wasn't until I established them in a betwixt and between climate in the Canary Islands that any kind of community spirit was engendered. The parrots were near enough to Africa not to be homesick or too cold, while the pigeons found the climate much like southern Europe.

"Then, my dear chap, there was no stopping them. It became a mere matter of selective breeding . . ."

How much of this did I believe? I was enjoying my stay in a delightful country house, with good service, excellent food, and plenty of liquor . . . with Susan's starry-eyed loveliness and gurgling laughter by way of a bonus. Even if she were tone deaf and addicted to literary larceny, she was young enough for it to be curable. So who was I to allow a mere question of belief to enter into the matter?

"If, as you say, General," I said, "the Pigot has been somewhat outmoded by radio-telephony—and in this I am inclined to agree with you—why, if I am not being too blunt, do you consider it worth while continuing your experiments?"

"A good question that, my boy. I'll answer it by asking you another. What do you know of psychological warfare?"

"Nothing much," I replied, "beyond the broad principle that if you can destroy a soldier's morale you're saved the trouble of killing him . . ."

"Congratulations, my boy! You have a gift for succinct expression. Well, as I propose to demonstrate to you, the Pigot Gumboylius will be the ultimate weapon in psychological warfare . . ."

For lunch there was a truly memorable sirloin of beef, which helped to restore the vitamin deficiency of the last painful months. The deep apple pie had a fairy-light crust. We ate it

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with great dollops of clotted cream, not to be confused with the pallid stuff that comes out of a mechanical separator.

Now let me say of myself, since nobody will say it for me, that I am not entirely devoid of imagination. My published works prove this. Indeed, the literary critic of the *Globe*, reviewing one of my biographies—I forget which one—called it "as fine a piece of imaginative writing as I have read for many years." But I confess that my imagination baulked at the idea of the Pigot Gumboylius.

"I hope, Walter," the General said cordially later that day, "that you will be able to stay here as a witness to my Great Experiment. Two weeks from now, as you may know, N.A.T.O. is putting on a big show near here. There is to be a combined land-sea-air exercise. An allied fleet with air cover is going to attempt a landing in Wimpole Bay . . . very big affair. Coincidentally, the N.A.T.O. Committee for the Advanced Study of Psychological Warfare has invited me to demonstrate the potentialities of the Pigot Gumboylius. I had the official letter this morning and—" the old boy beamed happily— "this will set the seal upon half a lifetime of intensive work."

"My very hearty congratulations, General!" I said. "If I can be of any help, you have only to ask me."

The General, as was his excellent habit, went to bed early that evening, leaving Susan and me free to do a little harmless smooching in the garden under a full moon. It was a glorious night, made perfect for me by the fact that Susan was in a silent mood. The nightingales were trilling overhead and the whole garden was bathed in the fragrance of night-scented stock. Dinner, as usual, had been excellent, light but adequate, and all was well in the best of worlds. Susan had natural cherry-red lips, full and soft. I kissed her gently and she sighed a deep sigh of pure contentment which was more eloquent than any words. Speech is, as Meredith pointed out, the small change of silence. Susan must be made to understand this great truth.

These and more tumultuous thoughts were passing through my mind when, from the direction of the Pigot enclosure, there came the melancholy and persistent hooting of an owl, repeated every few seconds for several minutes. Then, from the enclosure itself, a raucous voice which I recognised as belonging to Marmaduke exclaimed angrily, "Shut up, you flat-faced son of a sea-cook, and let us sleep!"

The reply to this was a burst of deep-toned laughter.

Marmaduke cut this short by saying something too indelicate to be quoted here. Indeed, I was impelled to cover one of Susan's ears with my hand and to stop the other with a kiss.

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"You let us sleep in the daytime," said the other voice, "and we'll let you sleep at night. O.K.?"

"What in heaven's name was that?" I asked, coming out of a clinch.

"I would rather, Walter," said Susan tremulously, "that you heard about it from Grandpa himself. Sometimes," she added with a shiver, "they frighten me and I begin to wonder—well, wonder about Grandpa and whether he's . . ."

"I know what you mean, my pet, but don't let it worry you. Lots of old soldiers go that way and they're none the worse for it. It's one of nature's protective devices, a kind of refuge from the futilities of peacetime soldiering. They're like greyhounds that go crackers chasing an electric hare . . . and they need to let a little blood from time to time."

"Thank you, Walter," she said sweetly. "Now I feel better about things. You are so wise and you understand so much . . ."

That was my good deed for the day. I broke it up then because my blood pressure was getting dangerously high and, whether he was mad or not, I did not want to be guilty of abusing the General's hospitality.

Over breakfast I mentioned to the General the loud disputation I had heard between the diurnal and nocturnal birds over the question of noise.

"It's been going on for years, my dear fellow," he remarked casually. "Both lots behave dashed unreasonably. There isn't the slightest reason why, with a little give and take, plus a modicum of consideration either side, they shouldn't come to a basis of understanding satisfactory to both."

"To be fair to the nocturnal bird who acted as spokesman," I told the old boy, "he did propose a bi-lateral agreement on the subject. But all he got for his pains was abuse. But while we're on the subject, General, what *was* that night bird I heard?"

"No known species, my dear fellow. It isn't classified. I haven't yet decided whether to call it the Pigotowl Gumboylius or the Night-flying Pigot. What do you think?"

"I'd like to know a little more about it before expressing an opinion, General. Would you mind filling me in on the background a bit?"

"Of course, my dear chap, of course! . . . Well, as we both agreed, radio-telephony had many advantages over the Pigot. The Pigot, furthermore, is inclined to be a bit slow on the wing—can't quite make up its mind whether it's a parrot or a pigeon and ends up by being neither. I'm sure I don't have to point out to a man of your intelligence that two of the most important factors in war are secrecy and surprise. The Pigot,

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I regret to have to admit, offered neither. They're noisy brutes at the best of times—hear 'em coming a mile off—only, contrary to the general rule of nature, the females are silent. But it was their flight which was a dead giveaway. Any halfway competent bird-watcher seeing a flight of Pigots overhead could tell at a glance that there was no such bird. Bitter disappointment!"

I clucked with sympathy.

"Well," continued the old soldier with pride and triumph shining from his eyes, "it was at this low ebb of my fortunes, with all my high hopes shattered, that the idea came to me of developing a night-flying branch of the Pigot family. My first thought, naturally, was the owl.

"Now I think I told you of the climatic difficulties I encountered when crossing the parrot and the pigeon. Well, my dear chap, let me assure you they were as nothing to the difficulties of creating any kind of compatibility between the Pigot and the owl. The Pigot goes to roost half an hour before sundown, while the owl doesn't wake up until half an hour after sundown. Here, plainly, was a case for deception."

"Well, General," I said, allowing him time to get his breath, "how did you manage it?"

"Like all great discoveries," he replied, "it was perfectly simple. An oculist friend of mine fitted the owls with specially made dark glasses which tricked them into believing that the sun was a full moon. After that there was no stopping them. Simple, eh? When you know the trick. So now we have the Pigotowl Gumboylius, possessing the main characteristics of the talking parrot, the carrier pigeon, and the barn owl, trained to work under cover of darkness. When you've heard them in action, my boy, you'll agree that I have evolved a psychological weapon which is to all others what the atom bomb is to the bow and arrow. Which reminds me," he added with apparent inconsequence, "that we have a luncheon guest today, a Colonel Kendall from Kentucky, who's a member of the Committee for the Advanced Study of Psychological Warfare and wants to be briefed on the nature of my demonstration. I've decided to tell him practically nothing, so I've instructed Susan to fill him with mint juleps instead. They drink a lot of it in Kentucky, I'm told, and a man who survives six of them is promoted to colonel."

Frankly, I didn't cotton to Colonel Kendall, who concentrated his attentions on Susan. She, in obedience to her grandfather's instructions, plied him with mint juleps to the point where he became glassy-eyed, losing the keen edge of his critical faculties. At lunch he showed us a picture of his wife and four children,

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taken on the porch of a stately white-pillared mansion, which I suspect was his home-town public library. After lunch, without any mention having been made of the Pigotowl Gumboylius, he and Susan disappeared to go bird-watching. Anyway, that's what they said. But they must have been watching owls because it was midnight before Susan returned home. I had to go downstairs to let her in: I greeted her coolly.

For the fateful evening on which General Gumboyle planned to demonstrate the remarkable powers of the Pigotowl Gumboylius to the Committee for the Advanced Study of Psychological Warfare, he arranged for the exclusive use of the upper floor of the Lord Nelson, a pleasant little pub in the centre of Port Wimpole, a normally quiet town which, during the N.A.T.O. exercises, had taken on a cosmopolitan air. Soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the N.A.T.O. countries swarmed in the streets and were six deep at every bar. Port Wimpole being primarily a fishing port, most of the able-bodied men were out with the fishing fleet, leaving the girls free to console themselves, each to her taste and opportunity, with our gallant allies.

As the shadows lengthened there came from every other secluded corner the trill of girlish laughter, giggles, and not very convincing protestations, followed by the long silences which, paradoxically, were the most eloquent of all. Language was no barrier. Time stood still under the magic of a summer's evening. The uniforms all blended into one uniform, for all cats are grey at night; the languages into one language, which needs no interpreter.

Meanwhile, on the upper floor of the Lord Nelson waited the N.A.T.O. Committee, some twenty strong, enjoying General Gumboyle's hospitality and wondering what it was all about.

It was not until the long twilight of a summer's evening had given way to the velvet blackness of night that General Gumboyle announced that he was ready to demonstrate "the ultimate weapon."

"Gentlemen," he announced in ringing tones, "what is it that since the dawn of history and beyond has haunted the waking and sleeping hours of soldiers and sailors away fighting their country's battles? What was it that sowed gloom and despondency in the ranks of the Crusaders, the Roman legions, and among both armies in the more recent campaign in the Libyan desert? What was it made them doubt, every man jack of them, whether they were not fools to endure the heat and cold, hardships and hunger, which were their daily lot?

"I will tell you, gentlemen," he went on since nobody replied, "or rather, I will allow the Pigotowl Gumboylius to tell you,

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in simple words more telling than any I could use. Listen, gentlemen, listen!"

In the near foreground of the town the sounds of giggles and protests were intensified by darkness. Seawards, we saw the lights of the returning fishing fleet, heard the rattle of the winches as they discharged their freight of silver mackerel.

We listened tensely, hearing nothing unusual, until from the north and east, roughly the direction of Wimpole Priory, we heard the steady wingbeats as of a multitude of birds. They circled the little town, dropping out of the sky to perch in trees, on the rain gutters of the houses and upon the time-mellowed roof of the reputedly Norman church, from all of which glowed the round luminous eyes of the ghostly visitors.

The General was standing out on the balcony in the tense attitude of a conductor drawing to himself the attentions of the orchestra. Following the excellent example of the Committee for the Advanced Study of Psychological Warfare, I helped myself to another drink.

"All right, boys," called the General's stentorian voice, "let 'em have it!"

From rooftop and tree, chimneypot and telegraph wire, there came through the still night air the deep-toned voices of a ghostly choir. The singing was ragged at first and the words inaudible, but there was something vaguely familiar about the tune, and when the singers came to the refrain, there was no longer any doubt in our minds, for the night seemed filled with the words and music of that grand old song, *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now.*

The same query seemed to have been in the minds of the fishermen returning to their homes and finding that there was no supper ready, and of other fathers, husbands, and boyfriends throughout the town. At first there was laughter, but laughter soon turned to sounds of strife. The combined efforts of civil and military police and the allied shore patrols failed to quell the riot which followed.

"You see what I mean?" asked the General as, again and again, the chorus of Pigotowls came around to the familiar refrain, rising above the screams of women and angry shouts of men who had found the answers to the insulting query which filled the night.

"You've proved your point, General," remarked the Chairman of the committee, "but if you don't stop those damn birds right now you'll wreck the Atlantic Alliance."

"I'll try to localise the conflict," said the General helpfully.

A few moments later there floated over the town the stirring,

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but largely unfamiliar strains of *Marching through Georgia* . . .

" It's quite amazing," the old soldier remarked chattily to the company at large, " how that song affects Americans. Some seem to like it and others don't. I forget the details, but it's something to do with Clark Gable, isn't it? "

" General," I said softly, " it's time to go home."

" Quite right, my boy, it's long past my bedtime."

Lights were already going out in the cottages, whence came the shrill sounds of domestic strife. Above our heads as we drove homewards the strains of *Marching Through Georgia*, a little ragged now, still filled the night, while small groups of young Americans rocked back and forth as they re-fought the Civil War with the same century-old purpose and vigour their grandfathers had shown before them.

We arrived at the gates of Wimpole Priory just as a large car with U.S. markings drove away. On the hall table stood a nearly empty bottle of bourbon. Beaming happily in the consciousness of the evening's triumph, the old soldier went straight to bed, while I went into the dining-room sadly to eat what was left of an excellent veal-and-ham pie, which I washed down with a bottle of claret.

I found Susan asleep in the garden in a hammock stretched between two trees.

She awoke as the Pigotowls straggled home from Port Wimpole, their raucous voices filling the night with the strains of *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now.*

I did not have to wonder long. I knew, too, that all was over between us, for as we parted on the landing outside her door, her good-night kiss tasted of mint julep.

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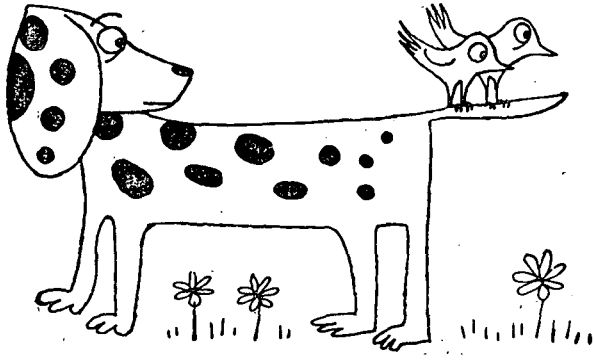

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# RAYMOND CHANDLER

## KILLER IN THE RAIN

## No1 FIND THE GIRL

DURING his lifetime Raymond Chandler published twenty-three short stories. Yet of this relatively small output only fifteen are generally known to the reading public. The rest have lain buried in the crumbling pages of old American pulp magazines. Yet these stories are among his finest.

For one who became, with Dashiell Hammett, a leading writer of "the poetry of violence," it is odd indeed that Chandler should have published his first story at the age of forty-five. When this first story, " Blackmailers Don't Shoot," appeared, Chandler was only one of the many good writers of the old Black Mask monthly. But when he died in 1959 he had been translated and published in eighteen countries and his work was sought throughout the world by those who recognised a good story and appreciated artistry in detective fiction.

When Chandler published his collection of short stories under the title " The Simple Art of Murder," that volume did not include any of the stories in this series we are publishing in Argosy.

When Raymond Chandler published " The Big Sleep," his first of seven novels, he did what multitudes of writers have done before him: he re-used some of his earlier material. Unlike most writers, however, re-using previously published stories left him with an uneasy feeling. Once part of a story was used in a novel it became—to use his word—" cannibalised." But since his death there have been very many requests that they should be reprinted and there no longer seems any good reason why, provided their origin is clearly explained, they should be denied to the many thousands of Chandler's readers. Apart from the pleasure of the stories themselves, his readers will realise that only a skilled craftsman could turn extracts from separately conceived short stories into three excellent novels.

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**Chandler went beyond the scope of what is normally thought of as an ordinary detective story. Because the concern for murder, in these stories, is a minor one, and the concern for human misery is a major one, Chandler was using an important theme of what we choose to call " serious " literature.**

**Now, after a quarter of a century, Chandler's " cannibalised " stories have been rescued for those readers who did not share the excitement of reading the Black Mask and other pulp magazines, the only other place in which they have appeared.**

**Here are stories in which one finds suspense, violence, tragedy, and a knight who cared about human lives—the detective, the " private eye," or " shamus " who was to become Philip Marlowe. And one sees the city of Los Angeles—sometimes " a big dry sunny place with ugly homes and no style, but good-hearted and peaceful " and sometimes " a hard-boiled city with no more personality than a paper cup "—vividly spread out there in Southern California, just as Raymond Chandler saw it.**

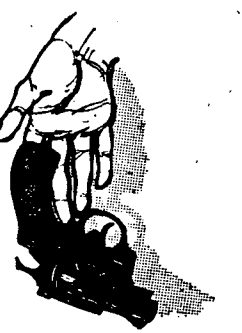
THE big guy wasn't any of my business. He never was, then or later, least of all then.

I was looking for a little Greek barber named Tom Aleidis whose wife wanted him to come home and was willing to spend a little money to find him. It was a peaceful job.

I saw the big guy standing in front of Shamey's, an all-coloured drink and dice club, not too savoury. He was looking up at the electric sign, with a sort of rapt expression, like an immigrant looking at the Statue of Liberty, like a man who had waited a long time and come a long way.

He wasn't just big. He was a giant. He looked seven feet high, and he wore the loudest clothes I ever saw on a really big man.

Maroon pants, a rough greyish coat with white billiard-balls for buttons, brown suède shoes with explosions in white kid on them, a brown shirt, a yellow tie, a large red carnation, and a front door handkerchief the colour of the Irish flag. It was neatly arranged in three points, under the red carnation. On Central Avenue, not the quietest dressed street in the world, with that size and that make-up he looked about as unobtrusive as a tarantula on a slice of angel food.



He went over and swung back the doors into Shamey's. The doors didn't stop swinging before they exploded outwards again. What sailed out and landed in the gutter and made a high, keening noise, like a wounded rat, was a slick-haired coloured youth. A " brown," the colour of coffee with rather thin cream in it. His face, I mean.

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It still wasn't any of my business. I watched the coloured boy creep away along the walls. Nothing more happened. So I made my mistake.

I moved along until I could push the swing door myself. Just enough to look in. Just too much.

A hand I could have sat in took hold of my shoulder and hurt and lifted me through the doors and up three steps.

A deep, soft voice said in my ear easily, " Negroes in here, pal. Can you tie that? "

" It's that kind of place," I said quickly.

" Don't say that, pal. Beulah used to work here. Little Beulah."

" Go on up and see for yourself."

He lifted me up three more steps.

" I'm feeling good," he said. " I wouldn't want anybody to bother me. Let's you and me go on up and maybe nibble a drink."

" They won't serve you," I said.

" I ain't seen Beulah in eight years, pal," he said softly, tearing my shoulder to pieces without noticing what he was doing. " She ain't even wrote in six. But she'll have a reason. She used to work here. Let's you and me go on up."

" All right," I said. " I'll go up with you. Just let me walk. Don't carry me. I'm fine. I'm all grown up. I go to the bathroom alone and everything. Just don't carry me."

" Little Beulah used to work here," he said softly. He wasn't listening to me.

We went on up. He let me walk.

A crap table was in the far corner beyond the bar, and scattered tables and a few customers were here and there. The whiny voices chanting around the crap table stopped instantly. Eyes looked at us in that dead, alien silence of another race.

A large negro was leaning against the bar in shirtsleeves with pink garters on his arms. An ex-pug who had been hit by everything but a concrete bridge. He pried himself loose from the bar edge and came towards us in a loose fighter's crouch.

He put a large brown hand against the big man's gaudy chest.

" No white folks, brother. Jes' fo' the coloured people. I'se sorry."

" Where's Beulah? " the big man asked in his deep, soft voice that went with his big white face and his depthless black eyes.

The negro didn't quite laugh. " No Beulah, brother. No hooch, no gals, jes' the scram, brother. Jes' the scram."

" Kind of take your goddam mitt off me," the big man said.

The bouncer made a mistake, too. He hit him. I saw his shoulder drop, his body swing behind the punch. It was a good clean punch. The big man didn't even try to block it.

He shook his head and took hold of the bouncer by the throat. He was quick for his size. The bouncer tried to knee him. The big man turned him and bent him, took hold of the back of his belt. That broke. So the big man just put his huge hand flat

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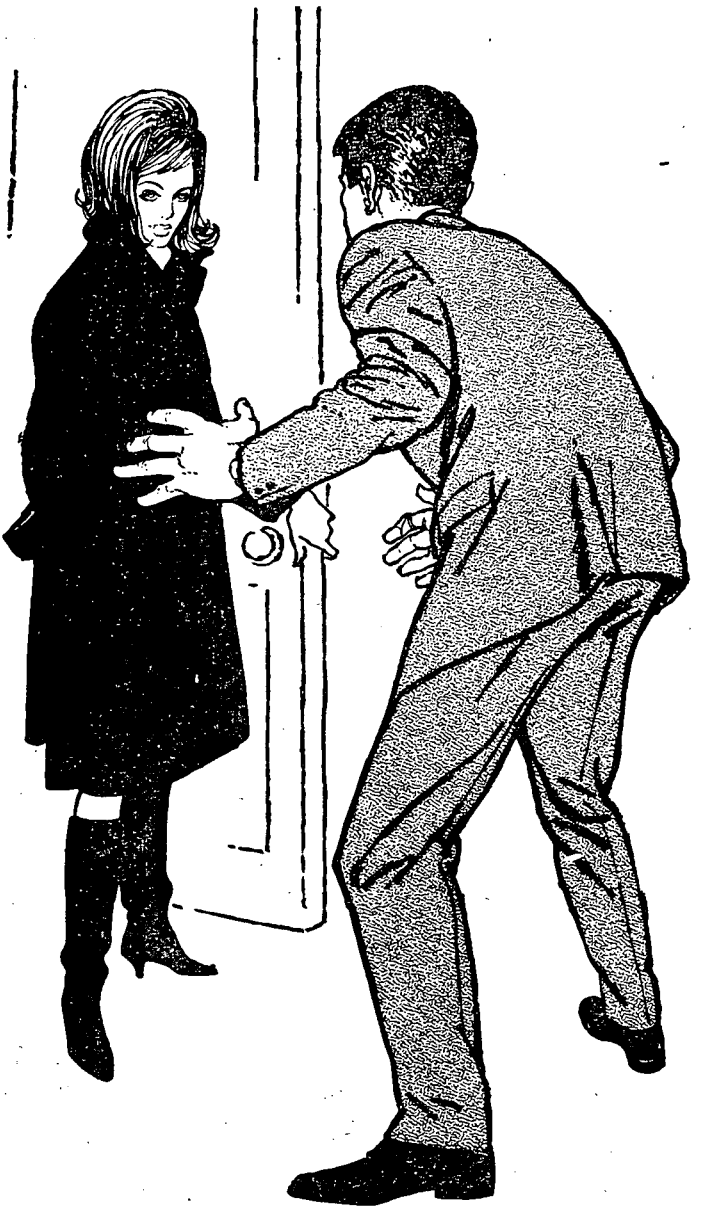

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against the bouncer's spine and threw him, clear across the narrow room. The bouncer hit the wall on the far side with a crash. Then he slid softly down the wall and lay there, motionless.

"Yeah," the big man said. "Let's you and me nibble one."

We went over to the bar. The barman swabbed the bar hurriedly. The customers, by ones and twos and threes, drifted out, silent across the bare floor, silent down the dim uncarpeted stairs. Their departing feet scarcely rustled.

"Whisky sour," the big man said.

We had whisky sours.

"You know where Beulah is?" the big man asked the barman impassively.

"Beulah, you says?" the barman whined. "I ain't seen her roun' heah lately. Not right lately, no suh."

"How long you been here?"

"'Bout a yeah, Ah reckon. 'Bout a yeah. Yes suh. 'Bout—"

"How long's this coop been a dinge box?"

"Says which?"

The big man made a fist down at his side, about the size of a bucket.

"Five years anyway," I put in. "This fellow wouldn't know anything about a white girl named Beulah."

The big man looked at me as if I had just hatched out. His whisky sour didn't seem to improve his temper.

"Who the hell asked you to stick your face in?"

I smiled. I made it a big, friendly smile. "I'm the fellow came in here with you. Remember?"

He grinned back, a flat, white grin. "Whisky sour," he told the barman. "Get them fleas outa your pants. Service."

The barman scuttled around, hating us with the whites of his eyes.

The place was empty now, except for the two of us and the barman, and the bouncer over against the far wall.

The bouncer groaned and stirred. He rolled over and began to crawl softly along the baseboard, like a fly with one wing. The big man paid no attention to him.

"There ain't nothing left of the joint," he complained. "There was a stage and a band and cute little rooms where you could have fun. Beulah did some warbling. A redhead. Awful cute. We was to of been married when they hung the frame on me."

We had two more whisky sours before us now. "What frame?" I asked.

"Where you figure I been them eight years I told you about?"

"In somebody's Stony Lonesome," I said.

"Right." He prodded his chest with a thumb like a baseball bat. "I'm Steve Skalla. The Great Bend bank in Kansas. Just me. Forty grand. They caught up with me right here. I was what that— Hey!"

The bouncer had made a door at the back and fallen through it. A lock clicked.

"Where's that door lead to?" the big man demanded.

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"Tha—tha's Mistah Montgom'ry's office, suh. He's the boss. He's got his office back—"

"He might know," the big man said. He wiped his mouth on the Irish flag handkerchief and arranged it carefully back in his pocket. "He better not crack wise neither. Two more whisky sours."

He crossed the room to the door. The lock gave him a little argument for a moment, then a piece of the panel dropped off and he went through, shut the door after him.

It was very silent in Shamey's now.

I looked at the barman.

"This guy's tough," I said quickly. "And he's liable to get ugly. You can see the idea. He's looking for an old sweetie who used to work here when it was a place for whites."

"I thought you was with him," the barman said suspiciously.

"He dragged me up. I didn't feel like being thrown over any houses."

There was a dull flat sound at the back of the place, behind the shut door. It might have been a slammed door. It might have been a gun. Just the one sound. No other followed it.

The door at the back opened and the big man came through quickly, with a Colt army forty-five automatic looking like a toy in his hand.

He looked the room over with one swift glance. His grin was taut. He came over to us in swift, almost soundless steps, for all his size.

"Rise up, nigger!"

The barman came up slowly, grey; his hands empty, high.

The big man felt me over, stepped away from us.

"Mister Montgomery didn't know where Beulah was either," he said softly. "He tried to tell me—with this." He waggled the gun. "So long, punks."

He was gone, down the stairs, very quickly, very quietly.

I went across the room and through that door.

Mister Montgomery was in there, behind a small scarred desk, close to a partly boarded-up window. Just folded, like a handkerchief or a hinge.

A drawer was open at his right hand. The gun would have come from there. There was a smear of oil on the paper that lined it.

Not a smart idea, but he would never have a smarter one—not now.

Nothing happened while I waited for the police.

Hiney got the job. A lean-jawed, complaining, over-slow detective lieutenant, with long yellow hands that he held on his knees while he talked to me in his cubicle at Headquarters. He looked poor and sour and honest.

This was an hour or so later. They knew all about Skalla then, from their own records. They even had a ten-year-old photo. All they didn't know was where he was.

"Six foot six and a half," Hiney said. "A guy that size can't

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get far, not in them fancy duds. He couldn't buy anything else in a hurry. Why'n't you take him? "

I handed the photo back and laughed.

Hiney pointed one of his long yellow fingers at me bitterly. " A tough shamus, huh? Six feet of man, and a jaw you could break rocks on. Why'n't you take him? "

" I'm getting a little grey at the temples," I said. " And I didn't have a gun. He had. He just picked me up. I'm kind of cute sometimes."

Hiney glared at me.

" All right," I said. " Why argue? I've seen the guy. He could wear an elephant in his vest pocket. And I didn't know he'd killed anybody. You'll get him all right."

" Yeah," Hiney said. " Well, the hell with him. Ain't nothing to do but just sit."

" Find the girl," I said. " Beulah. Skalla will. That's what he's after. That's what started it all. Find her."

" You find her," Hiney said. " I ain't been in a joy house in twenty years."

" I suppose I'd be right at home in one. How much will you pay? "

" Jeeze, guy, coppers don't hire private dicks. What with? "

" Think of your publicity," I said. " I bet you twenty-five I find Beulah before you get Skalla."

He thought it over. He seemed almost to count his bank balance on his cigarette puffs.

" Ten is top," he said. " And she's all mine—private."

I stared at him.

" I don't work for that kind of money," I said. " But if I can do it in one day—and you let me alone—I'll do it for nothing. Just to show you why you've been a lieutenant for twenty years."

He didn't like that crack much better than I liked his about the joy house. But we shook hands on it.

There was only one Shamey in the phone book. Violet Lu Shamey, 1644 West Fifty-fourth Place. I spent a nickel in a booth.

After a long time a dopey voice said, " Uh-huh. Wh-what is it? "

" Are you the Mrs. Shamey whose husband once ran a club—a place of entertainment? "

" Wha-what? My goodness sakes alive! My husband's been gone these seven years. Who did you say you was? "

" I'm a detective. I'll be right out. It's important."

" Wh-who did you say—" It was a thick, heavy, clogged voice.

It was a dirty brown house with a dirty brown lawn in front of it. On the porch stood one lonely rocker. I drove a little way and parked my roadster across the street, and walked back.

The bell didn't work, so I knocked. A woman opened the door blowing her nose. A long yellow face with weedy hair growing down the sides of it. Her body was shapeless in a flannel bathrobe long past all colour and design. It was just something around her.

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I said, " Mrs. Shamey? "

" You the—? "

" Yeah. I just called you."

She gestured me in wearily. " I ain't had time to get cleaned up yet," she whined.

We sat down in a couple of dingy rockers and looked at each other across a living-room in which everything was junk except a small new radio droning away behind its dimly-lighted panel.

" All the company I got," she said. Then she tittered. " Bert ain't done nothing, has he? I don't get cops calling on me much."

" Bert? "

" Bert Shamey, mister. My husband."

She tittered again and flopped her feet up and down. In her titter was a loose alcoholic overtone.

" A joke, mister," she said. " He's dead. I hope there's enough cheap blondes where he is. He never got enough of them here."

" I was thinking more about a redhead," I said.

" I guess he'd use one of those too." Her eyes, it seemed to me, were not so loose now. " I don't call to mind. Any special one? "

" Yeah. A girl named Beulah. I don't know her last name. She worked at the club. I'm trying to trace her for her folks. It's a coloured place now and, of course, the people there never heard of her."

" I never went there," the woman yelled, with unexpected violence. " I wouldn't know."

" An entertainer," I said. " A singer. No chance you'd know her, eh? "

She blew her nose again, on one of the dirtiest handkerchiefs I ever saw.

" I got a cold."

" You know what's good for it," I said.

She gave me a swift, raking glance. " I'm fresh out of that."

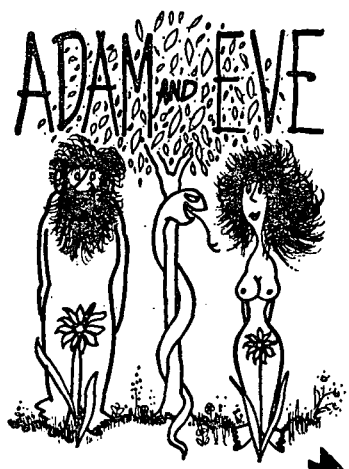
" I'm not."

" Gawd," she said. " You're no cop. No cop ever bought a drink."

I brought out my pint of bourbon and balanced it on my knee. It was almost full still. The woman's seaweed-coloured eyes jumped at the bottle. Her tongue coiled around her lips.

" Man, that's liquor," she sighed. " I don't care who you are. Hold it careful, mister."

She heaved up and waddled out of the room and came back with two thick, smeared glasses.

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I poured her a slug that would have made me float over a wall. A smaller one for me. She put hers down like an aspirin tablet and looked at the bottle. I poured her another. She took that over to her chair.

"This stuff dies painless with me," she said. "It never knows what hit it. What was we talkin' about?"

"A red-haired girl named Beulah. Used to work at the club. Remember better now?"

"Yeah." She used her second drink. I went over and stood the bottle on the table beside her. She used some out of that.

"Hold on to your chair," she said. "I got me an idea."

She got up out of the chair, sneezed, almost lost her bathrobe, slapped it back against her stomach, and stared at me coldly.

"No peekin'," she said, and wagged a finger at me and went out of the room again, hitting the side of the door casement on her way.

From the back of the house presently there were various types of crashes. A chair seemed to be kicked over. A bureau drawer was pulled out too far and smashed to the floor. There was a fumbling and thudding and loud language. After a while, then, there was the slow click of a lock and what seemed to be the screech of a trunk-top going up. More fumbling and banging things around. Then a chortle of satisfaction.

She came back into the room holding a package tied with faded pink tape. She threw it in my lap.

"Look 'em over. Photos. Newspaper stills. They're people from the club. By God, they're all the — left me. Them and his old clothes."

She sat down and reached for the whisky again.

I untied the tape and looked through a bunch of shiny photos of people in professional poses. Not all of them were women. The men had foxy faces and race-track clothes or make-up. The girls had good legs and displayed them. But their faces were as threadbare as a book-keeper's coat. All but one.

She wore a Pierrot costume, at least from the waist up. Under the high conical white hat her fluffed-out hair might have been red. Her eyes had laughter in them. I won't say her face was unspoilt. I'm not that good at faces. But it wasn't like the others. Somebody had been nice to that face. Perhaps just a tough mug like Skalla. But he had been nice. In the laughing eyes there was still hope.

I threw the others aside and carried this one over to the sprawled, glassy-eyed woman in the chair. I poked it under her nose.

"This one," I said. "Who is she? What happened to her?"

She stared at it fuzzily, then chuckled.

"Tha's Skalla's girl. Heck, I forget her name."

"Beulah," I said. "Beulah's her name."

She watched me under her tawny, mangled eyebrows. She wasn't so drunk.

"Yeah?" she said. "Yeah?"

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"Who's Skalla?" I rapped.

She giggled again.

"He's in the pen."

"Oh no, he isn't," I said. "He's out. I know him. He just got out."

Her face went to pieces like a clay pigeon. Instantly I knew who had turned Skalla in to the law. I laughed. I couldn't miss. Because she knew. If she hadn't known, she wouldn't have bothered to be cagey about Beulah. She couldn't have forgotten Beulah. Nobody could.

Her eyes went far back into her head. We stared into each other's faces. Then her hand snatched at the photo.

I stepped back and tucked it away in an inside pocket.

"Have another drink," I said. I handed her the bottle.

She took it, lingered over it, gurgled it slowly down her throat, staring at the faded carpet.

"Yeah," she said whisperingly. "I turned him in but he never knew. Money in the bank he was. Money in the bank."

"Give me the girl," I said. "And Skalla knows nothing from me."

"She's here," the woman said. "She's in radio. I heard her once. KLBL programme. She's changed her name, though. I dunno."

I had another hunch. "You do know," I said. "You're bleeding her still. Shamey left you nothing. What do you live on? You're bleeding her because she pulled herself up in the world, from people like you and Skalla. That's it, isn't it?"

"Money in the bank," she croaked. "Hundred a month. Reg'lar as rent. Yeah."

"Where is she?" I pounded on. "What's her name?"

"I dunno. Part of the deal. Get the money in a cashier's cheque. I dunno. Honest."

"The hell you don't!" I snarled. "Skalla—"

She came to her feet in a surge and screamed at me, "Get out, you! Get out before I call a cop! Get out, you — —!"

"O.K., O.K." I put a hand out soothingly. "Take it easy. I won't tell Skalla. Just take it easy."

She sat down again slowly

*"They're flying low again today—!"*

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and retrieved the almost empty bottle. After all I didn't have to have a scene now. I could find out other ways.

I drove down to the neighbourhood drugstore and shut myself in its phone booth to call Hiney.

" Listen," I told him, " the widow of the man that ran Shamey's when Beulah worked there is still alive. Skalla might call to see her, if he thinks he dares."

I gave him the address. He said sourly, " We almost got him. A prowl car was talkin' to a Seventh Street conductor at the end of the line. He mentioned a guy that size and with them clothes. He got off at Third and Alexandria, the conductor says. What he'll do is break into some big house where the folks is away. So we got him bottled."

I told him that was fine.

KLBL, the radio station, was on the western fringe of the city.

I went into a ground-floor reception room, one side of which was glass and showed an empty broadcasting studio with a stage and ranged chairs for an audience. A few people sat around the reception room trying to look magnetic, and the blonde receptionist was spearing chocolates out of a large box with nails that were almost royal purple in colour.

I waited half an hour and then got to see a Mr. Dave Marineau, studio manager. Marineau had a small sound-proofed office behind the organ. It was papered with signed photographs.

He was a handsome tall man, with red lips a little too full, a tiny silky moustache, large limpid brown eyes, shiny black hair, and long, pale, nicotined fingers.

He read my card while I tried to find my Pierrot girl on his wall and didn't.

" A private detective, eh? What can we do for you? "

I took my Pierrot out and placed it down on his beautiful brown blotter. It was fun watching him stare at it. All sorts of minute things happened to his face, none of which he wanted known. The sum total of them was that he knew the face and that it meant something to him. He looked up at me with a bargaining expression.

" Not very recent," he said. " But nice. I don't know whether we could use it or not. Legs, aren't they? "

" It's at least eight years old," I said. " What would you use it for? "

" Publicity, of course. We get one in the radio column about every second month. We're a small station still."

" Why? "

" You mean you don't know who it is? "

" I know who she was," I said.

" Vivian Baring, of course. Star of our Jumbo Candy Bar programme. Don't you know it? A tri-weekly serial, half an hour."

" Never heard of it," I said. " A radio serial is my idea of the square root of nothing."

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He leaned back and lit a cigarette, although one was burning on the edge of his glass-lined tray.

"All right," he said sarcastically. "Stop being fulsome and get to business. What is it you want?"

"I'd like her address."

"I can't give you that, of course. And you won't find it in any phone book or directory. I'm sorry." He started to gather papers together and then saw the second cigarette and that made him feel like a sap. So he leaned back again.

"I'm in a spot," I said. "I have to find the girl. Quickly. And I don't want to look like a blackmailer."

He licked his very full and very red lips. Somehow I got the idea he was pleased at something.

He said softly, "You mean you know something that might hurt Miss Baring—and incidentally the programme?"

"You can always replace a star in radio, can't you?"

He licked his lips some more. Then his mouth tried to get tough.

"I seem to smell something nasty," he said.

"It's your moustache burning," I said.

It wasn't the best gag in the world, but it broke the ice. He laughed. Then he did wingovers with his hands. He leaned forward and got as confidential as a tipster.

"We're going at this wrong," he said. "Obviously. You're probably on the level—you look it—so let me make my play." He grabbed a leather-bound pad and scribbled on it, tore the leaf off and passed it across. I read: 1737 *North Flores Avenue.*

"That's her address," he said. "I won't give the phone number without her O.K. Now treat me like a gentleman. That is, if it concerns the station."

I tucked his paper into my pocket and thought it over. Then I made my mistake.

"How's the programme going?"

"We're promised network audition. It's simple, everyday stuff called *A Street in Our Town*, but it's done beautifully. It'll wow the country some day. And soon." He wiped his hand across his fine white brow. "Incidentally, Miss Baring writes the scripts herself."

"He planted it just to tease us!"

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"Ah," I said. "Well, here's your dirt. She had a boyfriend in the big house. That is he used to be. She got to know him in a club where she worked once. He's out and he's looking for her and he's killed a man. Now wait a minute—"

He hadn't turned as white as a sheet, because he didn't have the right skin. But he looked bad.

"Now wait a minute," I said. "It's nothing against the girl and you know it. She's O.K. You can see that in her face. It might take a little counter-publicity, if it all came out. But that's nothing."

"It costs money," he said. "We're a poor studio. And the network audition would be off." There was something faintly dishonest about his manner that puzzled me.

"Nuts," I said, leaning forward and pounding the desk. "The real thing is to protect her. This tough guy—Skalla is his name—is in love with her. He kills people with his bare hands. He won't hurt her, but if she has a boyfriend or a husband—"

"She's not married," Marineau put in quickly, watching the rise and fall of my pounding hand.

"He might wring his neck for him. That would put it a little too close to her. Skalla doesn't know where she is. He's on the dodge, so it's harder for him to find out. When do you need her here?"

"Tomorrow night. She's not on tonight."

"I'll hide her for you until then," I said. "If you want me to. That's as far as I'd go alone."

He grabbed my card again, read it, dropped it into a drawer.

"Get out there and dig her out," he snapped. "If she's not home, stick till she is. I'll get a conference upstairs and then we'll see. Hurry it!"

I stood up. "Want a retainer?" he snapped.

"That can wait."

He nodded, made some more wingovers with his hands, and reached for his phone.

That number on Flores would be across town from where I was. Traffic was pretty thick, but I hadn't gone more than twelve blocks before I was aware that a blue coupé which had left the studio parking lot behind me was still behind me.

I jockeyed around in a believable manner, enough to feel sure it was following me. There was one man in it. Not Skalla. The head was a foot too low over the steering-wheel.

I jockeyed more and faster and lost it. I didn't know who it was, and at the moment I hadn't time to bother figuring it out.

I reached the Flores Avenue place and tucked my roadster into the kerb.

Bronze gates opened into a nice bungalow court, and two rows of bungalows with steep roofs of moulded shingles gave an effect a little like the thatched cottages in old English sporting prints. A very little.

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My number was the last bungalow on the left. Nobody answered the bell. I rang time after time, then I started back to a stone bench to sit down and wait.

A woman passed me walking fast, not in a hurry, but like a woman who always walks fast. She was a thin, sharp brunette in burnt-orange tweeds and a black hat. She had a nose that would be in things and tight lips.

She went up to my door, unlocked it, went in. She didn't look like Beulah.

I went back and pushed the bell again. The door opened at once.

The dark, sharp-faced woman gave me an up-and-down look and said, "Well?"

"Miss Baring? Miss Vivian Baring?"

"Who?" It was like a stab.

"Miss Vivian Baring—of KLBL broadcasting," I said. "I was told—"

She flushed tightly and her lips almost bit her teeth. "If this is a joke, I don't care for it," she said. She started the door towards my nose.

I said hurriedly, "Mister Marineau sent me."

That stopped the door closing. It opened again, very wide. The woman's mouth was as thin as a cigarette-paper. Thinner.

"I," she said very distinctly, "happen to be Mister Marineau's wife. This happens to be Mister Marineau's residence. I wasn't aware that this—this—"

"Miss Vivian Baring," I said. But it wasn't uncertainty about the name that had stopped her. It was plain, cold fury.

"—that this Miss Baring," she went on, exactly as though I had not said a word, "had moved in here. Mister Marineau must be feeling very amusing today."

"Listen, this isn't—"

The slamming door almost made a wave in the pool down the walk. I looked at it for a moment, and then I looked at the other bungalows. If we had an audience, it was keeping out of sight. I rang the bell again.

The door jumped

"It's a Cox's Orange Pippin—!"

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open this time. The brunette was livid. "Get off my porch!" she yelled. "Get off before I have you thrown off!"

"Wait a minute," I growled. "This may be a joke for him, but not for the police."

That got her. Her whole expression got soft and interested.

"Police?" she cooed.

"Yeah. It's serious. It involves a murder. I've got to find this Miss Baring. Not that she, you understand—"

The brunette dragged me into the house and shut the door and leaned against it, panting.

"Tell me," she said breathlessly. "Tell me. Has that red-headed something got herself mixed up in a murder?" Suddenly her mouth snapped wide open and her eyes jumped at me.

I slapped a hand over her mouth. "Take it easy!" I pleaded. "It's not Dave. Not your Dave."

"Oh." She got rid of my hand and let out a sigh and looked silly. "No, of course. Just for a moment . . . Well, *who* is it?"

"Nobody you know. I want Miss Baring's address. Have you got it?"

I didn't know any reason why she would have. Or rather, I might be able to think of one, if I shook my brains hard enough.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I have. Indeed, I have. Mister Smarty doesn't know that. Mister Smarty doesn't know as much as he thinks he knows, does Mister Smarty? He—"

"The address is all I can use right now," I growled. "And I'm in a bit of a hurry, Mrs. Marineau. Later on—" I gave her a meaning look— "I'm sure I'll want to talk to you."

"It's on Heather Street," she said. "I don't know the number. But I've been there. I've been *past* there. It's only a short street, with four or five houses, and only one of them on the downward side of the hill." She stopped, added, "I don't think the house has a number."

"Has she a phone?"

"Of course, but a non-listed number. She would have. They all do, those ——. If I knew it—"

"Yeah," I said. "You'd call her up and chew her ear off. Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Marineau. This is confidential, of course. I mean confidential."

"Oh, by all means!"

She wanted to talk longer but I pushed past her out of the house and went back down the flagged walk. I could feel her eyes on me all the way, so I didn't do any laughing.

The man with the restless hands and the full red lips had had what he thought was a very cute idea. He had given me the first address that came into his head, his own. Probably he had expected his wife to be out. I didn't know. It looked awfully silly, however I thought about it—unless he was pressed for time.

Wondering why he should be pressed for time, I got careless. I didn't see the blue coupé double-parked almost at the gates until I also saw the man step from behind it.

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He had a gun in his hand.

He was a big man, but not anything like Skalla's size. He made a sound with his lips and held his left palm out and something glittered in it. It might have been a piece of tin or a police badge.

Cars were parked along both sides of Flores. Half a dozen people should have been in sight. There wasn't one—except the big man with the gun and myself.

He came closer, making soothing noises with his mouth.

"Pinched," he said. "Get in my hack and drive it, like a nice lad." He had a soft, husky voice, like an over-worked rooster trying to croon.

"You all alone?"

"Yeah, but I got the gun," he sighed. "Act nice and you're as safe as the bearded woman at a Legion convention. Safer."

He was circling slowly, carefully. I saw the metal thing now.

"That's a special badge," I said. "You've got no more right to pinch me than I have to pinch you."

"In the car, bo. Be nice or your guts lie on this here street. I got orders." He started to pat me gently. "Hell, you ain't even rodded."

"Skip it!" I growled. "Do you think you could take me if I was?"

I walked over to his blue coupé and slid under its wheel. The motor was running. He got in beside me and put his gun in my side and we went on down the hill.

"Take her west on Santa Monica," he husked. "Then up, say, Canyon Drive to Sunset. Where the bridle path is."

I took her west on Santa Monica, past the bottom of Holloway, then a row of junk yards and some stores. The street widened and became a boulevard past Doheney. I let the car out a little to feel it. He stopped me doing that. I swung north to Sunset and then west again. Lights were being lit in big houses up the slopes. The dusk was full of radio music.

I eased down and took a look at him before it got too dark. Even under the pulled-down hat on Flores I had seen the eyebrows, but I wanted to be sure. So I looked again. They were the eyebrows, all right.

They were almost as even, almost as smoothly black, and

"Heel, dammit, heel—!"

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fully as wide as a half-inch strip of black plush pasted across his broad face above the eyes and nose. There was no break in the middle. His nose was large and coarse-grained and had hung out over too many beers.

" Bub McCord," I said. " Ex-copper. So you're in the snatch racket now. It's a longer stretch for you this time, baby."

" Aw, can it." He looked hurt and leaned back in the corner. Bub McCord, caught in a graft tangle, had done a three in Quentin.

He leaned his gun on his thigh and cuddled the door with his fat back. I let the car drift and he didn't seem to mind. It was between-times, after the homeward rush of the office man, before the evening crowd came out.

" This ain't no snatch," he complained. " We just don't want no trouble. You can't expect to go up against an organisation like KLBL Studio with a two-bit shakedown, and get no kick-back. It ain't reasonable."

He spat out of the window without turning his head. " Keep her rollin,' bo."

" What shakedown? "

" You wouldn't know, would you? Innocent, as the guy says."

" So you work for Marineau. That's all I wanted to know. Of course I knew it already, after I lost you, and you showed up again."

" Neat work, bo—but keep her rollin'. Yeah, I had to phone in. Just caught him."

" Where do we go from here? "

" I take care of you till nine-thirty. After that we go a place."

" What place? "

" It ain't nine-thirty. Hey, don't go to sleep in that there corner."

" Drive it yourself, if you don't like my work."

He pushed the gun at me hard. It hurt. I kicked the coupé from under him and set him back in his corner, but he kept his gun in a good grip.

Then I saw a red light winking ahead, and a sedan just passing it, and through the rear window of the sedan two flat caps side by side.

" You'll get awfully tired of holding that gun," I told McCord. " You don't dare use it anyway. You're copper-soft. There's nothing so soft as a copper who's had his badge torn off. Just a big heel. Copper-soft."

We weren't near to the sedan, but I wanted his attention. I got it. He slammed me over the head and grabbed the wheel and yanked the brake on. We ground to a stop. I shook my head woozily. By the time I came out of it he was away from me again, in his corner.

" Next time," he said thinly, for all his huskiness, " I put you to sleep. Just try it, bo. Just try it. Now roll—and keep the wisecracks down in your belly."

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I drove ahead, between the hedge that bordered the bridle path and the wide parkway beyond the kerbing. The cops in the sedan tooled on gently, drowsing, listening with half an ear to their radio, talking of this and that. I could almost hear them in my mind, the sort of things they would be saying.

"Besides," McCord growled, "I don't need no gun to handle you. I never see the guy I couldn't handle without no gun."

"I saw one this morning," I said. I started to tell him about Skalla.

Another red stop-light showed. The sedan ahead seemed loath to leave it. McCord lit a cigarette with his left hand, bending his head a little.

I kept on telling him about Skalla and the bouncer at Shamey's. Then I tramped on the throttle.

The little car shot ahead without a quiver. McCord started to swing his gun at me. I yanked the wheel hard to the right and yelled, "Hold tight! It's a crash!"

We hit the prowl car almost on the left rear fender. It waltzed around on one wheel, apparently, and loud language came out of it. It slewed, rubber screamed, metal made a grinding sound, the left tail-light splintered and probably the gas tank bulged.

The little coupé sat back on its heels and quivered like a scared rabbit.

McCord could have cut me in half. His gun muzzle was inches from my ribs. But he wasn't a tough guy, really. He was just a broken cop who had done time and got himself a cheap job after it and was on an assignment he didn't understand.

He tore the right-hand door open, and jumped out of the car. One of the cops was out by this time, on my side. I ducked down under the wheel. A flash-beam burnt across the top of my hat.

It didn't work. Steps came near and the flash jumped into my face.

"Come on out of that," a voice snarled. "What the hell you think this is—a race-track?"

I got out sheepishly. McCord was crouched somewhere behind the coupé, out of sight.

"Lemme smell of your breath."

I let him smell my breath.

"Whisky. I thought so. Walk, baby. Walk."

*"Actually, I prefer apricots—!"*

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He prodded me with the flashlight.

I walked.

The other cop was trying to jerk his sedan loose from the coupé. He was swearing, but he was busy with his own troubles.

"You don't walk like a drunk," the cop said. "What's the matter? No brakes?" The other cop had got the bumpers free and was climbing back under his wheel.

I took my hat off and bent my head. "Just an argument," I said. "I got hit. It made me woozy for a minute."

McCord made a mistake. He started running when he heard that. He vaulted across the parkway, jumped the wall and crouched. His footsteps thudded on turf.

That was my cue. "Hold-up!" I snapped at the cop who was questioning me. "I was afraid to tell you!"

"Jeeze, the howling — !" he yelled, and tore a gun out of his holster. "Why'n't you say so?" He jumped for the wall. "Circle the heap! We want that guy!" he yelled at the man in the sedan.

He was over the wall. Grunts. More feet pounding on the turf. A car stopped half a block away and a man started to get out of it but kept his foot on the running-board. I could barely see him behind his dimmed headlights.

The cop in the prowl car charged at the hedge that bordered the bridle path, backed furiously, swung around and was off with screaming siren.

I jumped into McCord's coupé, and jerked the starter.

Distantly there was a shot, then two shots, then a yell.

I gave the coupé all it had and left the neighbourhood, then I ditched it and took a taxi. I knew I could be traced. That wasn't important. The important thing was how soon.

From a cocktail bar I called Hiney. He was still on the job and still sour. "Anything new on Skalla?"

"Listen," he said nastily, "was you over to talk to that Shamey woman?"

"Certainly I was," I said.

"Why was you there?"

"I thought she might know Beulah, of course. She did. Want to raise that bet a little?"

"Can the comedy. She's dead."

"Skalla—" I started to say.

"That's the funny side," he grunted. "He was there. Some nosy old — next door seen him. Only there ain't a mark on her. The doc don't even know what she died of. Not yet."

"Fear," I said. "She's the one that turned Skalla up eight years ago. Whisky may have helped a little."

"Is that so?" Hiney said. "Well, well. I guess you better come in."

"Not me," I said. "Beverly Hills wants me for a hit-and-run. I'm a criminal myself now."

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I had a quick snack and some coffee before I took a taxi to Las Flores and Santa Monica and walked up to where I had left my roadster parked.

Nothing was happening around there except that some kid in the back of a car was strumming a ukelele.

I pointed my roadster towards Heather Street.

The house I wanted was built downwards, one of those clinging vine effects, with a front door below the street level, a patio on the roof, a bedroom or two possibly in the basement, and a garage as easy to drive into as an olive bottle.

The garage was empty, but a big shiny sedan had its two right wheels off the road, on the shoulder of the bank. There were lights in the house.

I drove around the kerb, parked, walked back and poked a flashlight into the sedan.

It was registered to one David Marineau. That made me go back and get a gun out of a locked pocket.

I repassed the sedan, stepped down three rough stone steps and looked at the bell beside a narrow door.

I didn't push it, I just looked at it. The door wasn't quite shut. A fairly wide crack of dim light edged around its panel. I pushed it an inch. Then I pushed it far enough to look in.

Then I listened. The silence of that house was what made me go in. It was one of those utterly dead silences that come after an explosion. Or perhaps I hadn't eaten enough dinner. Anyway I went in.

The long living-room went clear to the back, which wasn't very far as it was a small house. At the back there were French doors and the metal railing of a balcony showed through the glass.

There were nice lamps, nice chairs with deep sides, nice tables, a thick apricot-coloured rug, two small cosy davenports, one facing and one right-angled to a fireplace with an ivory mantel and a miniature Winged Victory on that. A fire was laid behind the copper screen, but not lit.

The room had a hushed warm smell. It looked like a room where people got made comfortable. There was a bottle of Vat 69 on a low table with glasses and a copper bucket, and tongs.

*"I've turned over a new leaf—!"*

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I fixed the door about as I had found it and just stood. Silence. Time passed.

Then I wasn't alone any longer.

Mrs. Marineau slid into the room at the far end, by a door beside the French doors. She didn't make any more noise than a butterfly. She still wore the black hat and the burnt-orange tweeds, and they still looked like hell together. She had a small glove in her hand wrapped around the butt of a gun. I don't know why. I never did find that out.

She didn't see me at once and when she did it didn't mean anything much. She just lifted the gun a little and slid along the carpet towards me, her lip clutched back so far that I couldn't even see the teeth that clutched it.

I said, " You got them, huh? "

She nodded a little.

" Just him," she said.

" Put the gun down. You're all through with it."

She said, " She wasn't here."

Her voice had a dry, impersonal sound, flat, without timbre.

" Miss Baring wasn't here? " I asked.

" No."

" Remember me? "

She took a better look at me but her face didn't light up with any pleasure.

" I'm the guy that was looking for Miss Baring," I said. " You told me where to come. Remember? "

The brunette said, " You're no cop. Dave said you were a fake."

I made a broad, hearty gesture and moved a little closer to her, unobtrusively.

" Not a city cop," I admitted. " But a cop. And that was a long time ago. Things have happened since then. Haven't they? "

" Yes," she said. " Especially to Dave. Hee, hee."

It wasn't a laugh. It wasn't meant to be a laugh. It was just a little steam escaping through a safety valve.

The idea was to get close enough to grab her gun. It was still too far.

" Anybody here besides you? " I asked.

" Just Dave."

" I had an idea Dave was here." It wasn't clever, but it was good for another foot.

" Oh, Dave's here," she agreed. " Yes. You'd like to see him? "

" Well—if it isn't too much trouble."

" Hee, hee," she said. " No trouble at all. Like this."

She jerked the gun up and snapped the trigger at me. She did it without moving a muscle of her face.

The gun not going off puzzled her, in a sort of vague, week-before-last manner. Nothing immediate or important. I wasn't there any more. She lifted the gun up, still being very careful about the black kid glove wrapped about its butt, and peered into the muzzle. That didn't get her anywhere. She shook the gun.

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Then she was aware of me again. I hadn't moved. I didn't have to, now.

"It's not loaded," she said.

"Maybe just all used up," I said. "Too bad. These little ones only hold seven. Let's see if I can do anything."

She put the gun in my hand. Then she dusted her hands together. Her eyes didn't seem to have any pupils, or to be all pupils. I wasn't sure which.

The gun wasn't loaded. The magazine was quite empty. I sniffed the muzzle. The gun hadn't been fired since it was last cleaned.

That got me. Up to that point it had looked fairly simple, if I could get by without any more murder. But this threw it. I hadn't any idea what either of us was talking about now.

I dropped her pistol into my side pocket and chewed my lip for a couple of minutes, to see what might turn up. Nothing did.

"Well," I said at last, "let's kind of look through the house and see what's what."

"You mean Dave? He's in the bedroom." She tittered. "He's at home in bedrooms."

Dave Marineau was dead all right—if there had been any doubt about it.

A white bowl lamp with raised figures shone beside a large bed in a green and silver bedroom. It was the only light in the room. It filtered a hushed kind of light down at his face. He hadn't been dead long enough to get the corpse look.

He lay sprawled casually on the bed, a little sideways, as though he had been standing in front of it when he was shot. One arm was flung out as loose as a strand of kelp and the other was under him. His open eyes were flat and shiny and almost seemed to hold a self-satisfied expression.

I didn't see the wound at all at first. It was high up, on the right side of his head, in the temple, but back rather far, almost far enough to drive the petrosal bone through the brain. It was powder-burnt, rimmed with dusky red, and a fine trickle spidered down from it and

*"The party's over— we've been evicted!"*

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got browner as it got thinner against his cheek. "Hell, that's a contact wound," I snapped at the woman. "A suicide wound."

She stood at the foot of the bed and stared at the wall above his head. If she was interested in anything besides the wall, she didn't show it.

I ploughed around on the bed, went down on the floor, got halfway under the bed, swore, got up again, and rolled the dead man to one side enough to look under him. There was a bright, brassy shell-case but no gun.

It looked like murder again. I liked that better. He wasn't the suicide type.

"See any gun?" I asked her.

"No." Her face was as blank as a pie pan.

"Where's the Baring girl? What are you supposed to be doing here?"

She bit the end of her left little finger. "I'd better confess," she said. "I came here to kill them both."

"Go on," I said.

"Nobody was here. Of course, after I phoned him and he told me you were not a real cop and there was no murder and you were a blackmailer and just trying to scare the address out of me—"

She stopped and sobbed once, hardly more than a sniff, and moved her line of sight to a corner of the ceiling.

"I came here to kill both of them," she said. "I don't deny that."

"With an empty gun?"

"It wasn't empty two days ago. I looked. Dave must have emptied it. He must have been afraid. So I came here. That was the last insult—his sending you to me to get her *address*. That was more than I would—"

"The story," I said.

"Yes. Well, he said there was something about Miss Baring he had to see her about on account of the studio and it was nothing personal, never had been, never would be—"

"Yeah," I said. "Go on."

"The door wasn't shut. I came in. That's all. Now, I'm going. And you're not going to stop me. You know where I live, you—"

"We'll talk to some law first," I said. I went over and shut the door and turned the key on the inside of it and took it out. Then I went over to the French doors.

They were on the far side of the bed and opened on the same balcony as the living-room. The telephone was in a niche in the wall there, by the bed, where you could yawn and reach out for it in the morning and order a tray of diamond necklaces sent up to try on.

I sat down on the side of the bed and reached for the phone, and a muffled voice came to me through the glass and said, "Hold it, pal! Just hold it!"

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Even muffled by the glass it was a deep, soft voice. I had heard it before. It was Skalla's voice.

I was in line with the lamp. The lamp was right behind me. I dived off the bed on to the floor.

A shot roared and glass sprinkled the back of my neck. I couldn't figure it. Skalla wasn't on the balcony. I had looked.

I rolled over and started to snake away along the floor away from the French doors, my only chance with the lamp where it was.

Mrs. Marineau did just the right thing—for the other side. She jerked a slipper off and started slamming me with the heel of it. I grabbed for her ankles and we wrestled around and she cut the top of my head to pieces.

I threw her over. It didn't last long. When I started to get up Skalla was in the room, laughing at me. The gun still had a home in his fist. The French door looked as though a rogue elephant had passed that way.

"O.K.," I said. "I give up."

"Who's the twist? She sure likes you, pal."

I got up on my feet. The woman was over in a corner somewhere. I didn't even look at her.

"Turn around, pal, while I give you the fan."

I didn't say anything about the door key, but he took it. So he must have been watching from somewhere. He left me my car keys. He looked at the little empty gun and dropped it back in my pocket. "Where'd you come from?" I asked.

"Easy. Clumb up the balcony and held on, looking through the grille at you. How you been, pal?"

Blood from the top of my head was leaking down my face. I got a handkerchief out and mopped at it. I didn't answer him.

"Jeeze, you sure was funny on the bed grabbin' for the phone with the stiff at your back."

"I was a scream," I growled. "Take it easy. He's her husband."

He looked at her. "That's tough. If I'd known—but I couldn't help meself. The guy asked for it."

"You—" I started to say, staring at him. I heard a queer, strained whine behind me, from the woman.

*"If you aren't gone from here in ten minutes I'll do something more drastic with my flaming sword—!"*

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"Who else, pal? Who else?- Let's all go back in that livin'-room. Seems to me there was a bottle there. And you need some stuff on that head."

"You're crazy to stick around here," I growled. "There's a general pick-up out for you."

Skalla looked at me and said very quietly, "Nobody's phoned no law from here, pal."

Skalla watched me while I washed and put some tape on my head in the bathroom. Then we went back to the living-room. Mrs. Marineau, curled up on one of the davenports, looked blankly at the unlit fire. She didn't say anything.

She hadn't run away because Skalla had her in sight all the time. She acted resigned, indifferent, as if she didn't care what happened now.

I poured three drinks from the Vat 69 bottle, handed one to the brunette. She held her hand out for the glass, half smiled at me, crumpled off the davenport to the floor with the smile still on her face.

I put the glass down, lifted her and put her back on the davenport with her head low. Skalla stared at her. She was out cold, as white as paper.

Skalla took his drink, sat down on the other davenport and put the forty-five beside him. He drank his drink looking at the woman, with a queer expression on his big pale face.

"Tough," he said. "Tough. But the louse was cheatin' on her anyways. The hell with him." He reached for another drink, swallowed it, sat down near her on the other davenport right-angled to the one she lay on.

His feet were spread wide on the apricot rug, he looked down sadly at the white kid explosions on the suède. They were the worst-looking shoes I ever saw.

"What you doin' here?" he asked gruffly.

"Looking for Beulah. I thought she might need a little help. I had a bet with a city cop I'd find her before he found you. But I haven't found her yet."

He said softly, "Me neither, pal. I been around for hours. She ain't been home. Well, I gotta blow. I'd like to take the stiff, account of Beulah. Can't leave him around to scare her."

He looked at the woman at his elbow on the other little davenport. Her face was still greenish-white, her eyes shut. There was a movement of her breast.

"Without her," he said, "I guess I'd clean up right and button you good." He touched the forty-five at his side. "No hard feelings, of course. Just for Beulah. But the way it is—heck, I can't knock the frail off."

"Too bad," I snarled, feeling my head.

He grinned. "I guess I'll take your car. For a short ways. Throw them keys over."

I threw them over. He picked them up and laid them beside the big Colt. He leaned forward a little. Then he reached back

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into one of his pockets and brought out a small pearl-handled gun, about .25 calibre. He held it on the flat of his hand.

"This done it," he said. "I came around the house. I hear the bell ring. This guy is at the front door. I don't come up far enough for him to see me. Nobody answers. Well, what do you think? The guy's got a key. A key to Beulah's house!"

His huge face became one vast scowl. The woman on the davenport was breathing a little more deeply, and I thought I saw one of her eyelids twitch.

"He had the door shut. I opened it my way. He was in the middle of this here room, over there by a desk. He's been here before all right though—" the scowl came back again— "because he slipped a hand into the desk drawer and come up with this." He danced the pearl-handled thing on his enormous palm.

Mrs. Marineau's face now had distinct lines of tensity.

"So I start for him. He lets one go. A miss. He's scared and runs into the bedroom. Me after. He lets go again. Another miss. You'll find them slugs in the wall somewheres."

"I'll make a point of it," I said.

"I say, 'My woman lives here, pal. How come?' He says, 'Come back tomorrow. This here is my night.'"

Skalla spread his free left hand in a large gesture. "After that nature's got to take its course, ain't it?"

One of the woman's eyelids flickered again. I said, "Then?"

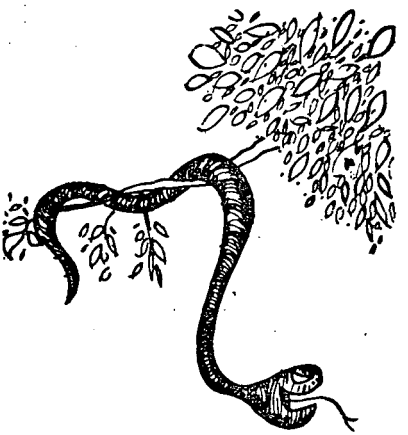
"I scrammed. A guy does. But I come back. I got to thinkin' it's tough on Beulah, with that stiff on her bed. But this frail comes along and spoils it."

The woman must have been shamming for quite a long time. She must have been moving her legs and feet and turning her body a fraction of an inch at a time, to get in the right position, to get leverage against the back of the davenport.

The pearl-handled gun still lay on Skalla's flat hand when she moved. She shot off the davenport in a flat dive, gathering herself in the air like an acrobat. She brushed his knees and picked the gun off his hand.

She laughed just before she shot him.

She shot him four times, in the lower belly, then the hammer clicked.



*"To be perfectly frank, it was all my fault—!"*

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She threw the gun at his face and rolled away from him.

He stepped over her without touching her. His big pale face was quite empty for a moment, then it settled into stiff lines of torture, lines that seemed to have been there always.

He walked erectly along the rug towards the front door. I jumped for the big Colt and got it. To keep it from the woman. At the fourth step he took, blood showed on the yellowish nap of the rug. After that it showed at every step he took.

He reached the door and put his big hand flat against the wood and leaned there for a moment. Then he shook his head and turned back. His hand left a bloody smear on the door where he had been holding his belly.

He sat down in the first chair he came to and leaned forward and held himself tightly with his hands. The blood came between his fingers slowly, like water from an overflowing basin.

" Them little slugs," he said, " hurt just like the big ones."

The dark woman walked towards him like a marionette. He watched her come unblinkingly, under his half-lowered, heavy lids.

When she got close enough she leaned over and spat in his face.

He didn't move. His eyes didn't change. I threw her into a chair. I wasn't nice about it.

" Leave her alone," he grunted at me. " Maybe she loved the guy."

Nobody tried to stop me from telephoning this time.

Hours later I sat on a red stool at Lucca's eating place.

I took another martini over and ordered a meal. It was late, past one. Skalla was in the prison ward of the General Hospital. Miss Baring hadn't showed up yet, but they knew she would, as soon as she heard Skalla was no longer dangerous.

KLBL, who didn't know anything about it at first, had got a nice hush working. They were to have twenty-four hours to decide how to release the story.

Lucca's was almost as full as at noon. After a while an Italian brunette with a grand nose and eyes you wouldn't fool with came over and said, " I have a table for you now."

My imagination put Skalla across the table from me. His flat black eyes had something in them that was more than mere pain, something he wanted me to do. Part of the time he was trying to tell me what it was, and part of the time he was holding his belly in one piece and saying again, " Leave her alone. Maybe she loved the guy."

I left there and drove north. Heather Street wasn't staked. They were that sure of her.

I drifted along the street below and looked up the scrubby slope spattered with moonlight and showing her house from behind as if it were three storeys high. I could see the metal brackets that supported the porch. They looked high enough off the ground so that a man would need a balloon to reach them. But there was where he had gone up. Always the hard way with him.

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He could have run away and had a fight for his money or even bought himself a place to live up in. There were plenty of people in the business, and they wouldn't fool with Skalla. But he had come back instead to climb her balcony, like Romeo, and get his stomach full of slugs. From the wrong woman, as usual.

I drove around a white curve that looked like moonlight itself and parked and walked up the hill the rest of the way. I carried a flash, but I didn't need it to see there was nobody on the doorstep waiting for the milk. I didn't go in the front way. There might just happen to be some snooper with night glasses up on the hill.

I sneaked up the bank from behind, between the house and the empty garage. I found a window I could reach and made not much noise breaking it with a gun inside my hat. Nothing happened except that the crickets and tree-frogs stopped for a moment.

I picked a way to the bedroom and prowled my flash around discreetly, after lowering the shades and pulling the drapes across them. The light dropped on a tumbled bed, on daubs of print powder, on cigarette butts on the window-sills and heel marks in the nap of the carpet. There was a green and silver toilet set on the dressing-table and three suitcases in the closet. There was a built-in bureau back in there with a lock that meant business. I had a chilled-steel screwdriver with me as well as the flash. I jimmied it.

The jewellery wasn't worth a thousand dollars. Perhaps not half. But it meant a lot to a girl in show business. I put it back where I got it.

The living-room had shut windows and a queer, unpleasant, sadistic smell. The law enforcement had taken care of the Vat 69, to make it easier for the fingerprint men. I had to use my own. I got into a chair and waited in the darkness.

Then I went to sleep.

When I woke up the moon had gone from the front windows and a car had stopped somewhere. Light, delicate, careful steps separated themselves from the night. They were outside the front door. A key fumbled in the lock.

In the opening door the dim sky showed a head without a hat. The door clicked shut.

Steps rustled on the rug. I already had the lamp cord in my fingers. I yanked it and there was light.

The girl didn't make a sound, not a whisper of sound.

I said, "Hello, Beulah."

She was worth waiting for.

Not too tall, not too short, that girl. She had the long legs that can walk and dance. Her hair even by the light of the one lamp was like a brush fire at night. Her face had laughter wrinkles at the corner of the eyes. Her mouth could laugh.

The features were shadowed and had that drawn look that makes some faces more beautiful because it makes them more delicate. I couldn't see her eyes. They might have been blue enough to make you jump, but I couldn't see.

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After a while she said very softly, " Police, I suppose."

She had a nice voice, too. I still think of it, at times.

I said, " Let's sit down and talk. We're all alone here. Ever drink out of the bottle? "

She didn't answer that one. " Who are you? "

" Just a shamus. Private detective to you."

" Who hired you? "

" Studio KLBL. To protect you from Skalla."

" So they know," she said. " So they know about him."

I digested that and said nothing.

" Who's been here? " she went on sharply. She was still standing in the middle of the room, with her hands in her coat pockets now.

" Everybody but the plumber," I said. " He's a little late, as usual."

" You're one of *those* men." Her nose seemed to curl a little. " A funny man."

" No," I said. " Not really. It's just a way I get talking to the people I have to talk to. Skalla came back again and ran into trouble and got shot up and arrested. He's in the hospital. Pretty bad."

She didn't move. " How bad? "

" He might live, if he'd have surgery. Doubtful, even with that. Hopeless without."

She moved at last and started to sit down. " Not in that chair," I said quickly. " Over here."

She came over and sat near me. Lights twisted in her eyes. I could see them now. Little twisting lights like Catherine wheels spinning brightly.

She said, " Why did he come back? "

" He thought he ought to tidy up. Remove the body and so on. A nice guy, Skalla."

" Do you think so? "

" If nobody else in the world thinks so, I do."

" I'll have that drink," she said.

I handed her the bottle. She looked towards the side door that led to the bedroom at the back of me.

" Gone to the morgue," I said. " You can go in there."

She stood up at once and went out of the room. She came back almost at once.

" What have they got on him? " she asked. " If he recovers."

" He killed a shine this morning. It was more or less self-defence on both sides. I don't know. Except for Marineau he might get a break."

" Marineau? " she said.

" Yeah. You knew he killed Marineau."

" Don't be silly," she said. " I killed Dave Marineau."

" O.K.," I said. " But that's not the way Skalla wants it."

She stared at me. " You mean he came back here deliberately to take the blame? "

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"If he had to, I guess. I think he really meant to cart Marineau off and lose him. Only a woman showed up here—Mrs. Marineau."

"Yes," the girl said tonelessly. "She thinks I was his mistress."

"Were you?" I asked.

"Don't try that," she said. She went out of the room again.

Sound of a suitcase being yanked about came into the living-room. I went in after her. She was packing pieces of cobweb and packing them as if she liked nice things nicely packed.

"You don't wear that stuff inside," I told her, leaning in the door.

She ignored me some more. "I was going to make a break for Mexico," she said. "Then South America. I didn't mean to shoot him. He roughed me up and tried to blackmail me into something and I went and got the gun. Then we struggled again and it went off. Then I ran away."

"Just what Skalla said he did," I said.

She shivered. Her face whitened. She went on taking the things out of the suitcase and putting them in again.

I went over nearer to her. "Got any bruises or torn clothes to show?" I asked.

"No."

"Too bad," I said, and took hold of her.

Her eyes flamed at first and then turned to black stone. I tore her coat off, tore her up plenty, put hard fingers into her arms and neck and used my knuckles on her mouth. I let her go, panting. She reeled away from me, but didn't quite fall.

"We'll have to wait for the bruises to set and darken," I said.

She began to laugh. Then she went over to the mirror and looked at herself. She began to cry.

"Get out of here while I change my clothes!" she shouted. "I'll give it a try. But if it makes any difference to Steve—I'm going to tell it right."

"Shut up and change your clothes," I said.

I went out and banged the door.

We rode the rest of the night, first in separate cars to hide hers in my garage, then in mine.

By morning her face looked like a fighter's after a tough round. She had a lower lip the size of a banana and the bruises on her arms and neck were wonderful.

With the first strong daylight we went to the City Hall.

They didn't even think of holding her or checking up. They practically wrote the statement themselves. She signed it blank-eyed, thinking of something else.

Skalla died at two-thirty the same afternoon. She was holding one of his huge, limp fingers, but he didn't know her from the Queen of Siam.

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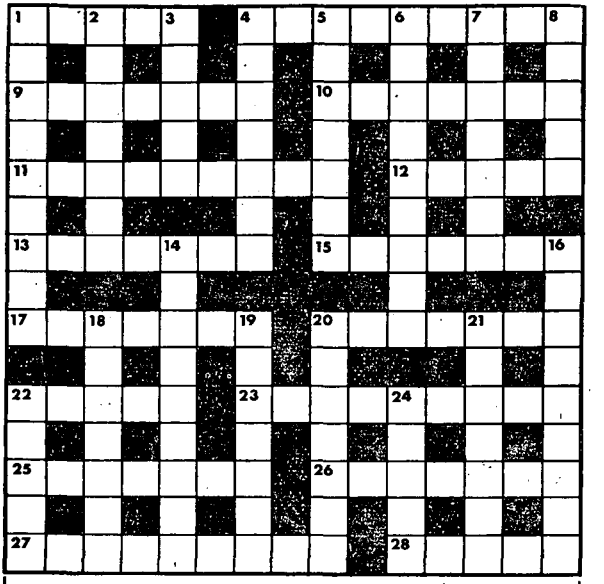

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CUT ALONG THE LINE

# SPECIAL PRIZE CROSS-WORD No. 1

## ACROSS

1 "Yo-ho-ho," fifteen men on this! (5).

4 Ship's name is malformed (9).

9 The object in the landlord's demand for clothes (7).

10 No inclination to be honest (7).

11 Living rafters? (9).

12 Are they nosy in court? (5).

13 Doctor goes to the boundaries and sprinkles flour (7).

15 Scalp it and repair with this substance? (7).

17 Learned but can be rude at first (7).

20 Father completes the additions (7).

22 Reverse a piece of stone for this kind of wood (5).

23 A French noble back on Scottish isle finishes this fish (9).

25 His utterances may be amorous but are not encouraging (7).

26 Lentils were badly packed (3, 4).

27 It's after after aft for this part of the boat (9).

28 Prose can be puzzling (5).

## DOWN

1 Do they store this paper in a C.I.D. garret? (9).

2 Summary in which pious cat has its points (7).

3 Are drunkenly amongst the sober on this outing (5).

4 Frenchman speaks (7).

5 Would Cerberus have liked this fruit? (7).

6 No wonder directors are tough if they sit on this! (9).

7 Bell-hop and worker make spectacle (7).

8 The air is full of them (5).

14 Nasty old puss! (9).

16 Burn a broken crate to find the letter (9).

18 Perhaps Sue has a bird to set free (7).

19 O grab me back and put a stop to it (7).

20 Raise a song when this troop exercise occurs? (7).

21 Grammarians find a net user amongst them (7).

22 "Nods, and ——, and wreathed smiles." (Milton) (5).

24 Everybody out of bed—it's finished! (3, 2).

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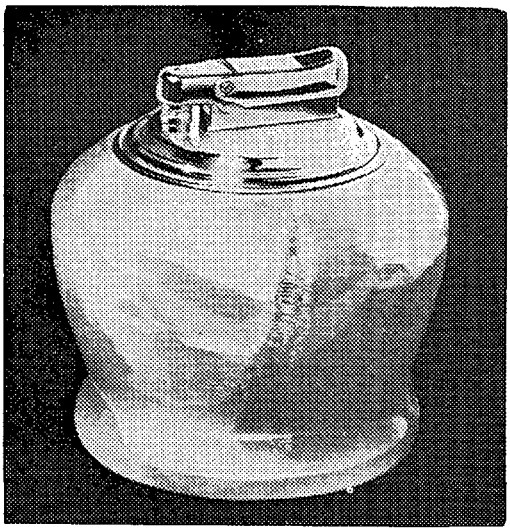

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A. Facey

# Short Story Writing

Everyone has a story in his life. No matter how humdrum that life has been it contains at least one episode which could, properly handled by a writer, entertain readers.

But there are more fictional possibilities than that. The trained story writer realises that every day of one's life holds fictional material.

*If you have aptitude you can be trained to work ideas into plots and make stories them which editors would be glad to buy.*

Learn the essential technique by post—the Regent Institute way—under the stimulating guidance of successful writers.

## Earning While Learning

You are shown how to get plots (the R.I. Plot Finder—a valuable aid—taps dozens of sources of ideas), how to construct, how to write dialogue, how to prepare MSS. and HOW TO SELL THEM.

Many R.I. students have sold short stories while learning. "This is the third story they (a weekly magazine) have taken and they are asking for more," reports a student. Another writes: "Perhaps you would like to know that the two stories you advised me to submit for publication have been accepted by the markets you suggested."

## ★ Send today for HOW TO SUCCEED AS A WRITER

Take the first step now by sending to the Regent Institute for a free copy of "How to Succeed as a Writer," which contains striking facts about the openings for new writers today.

It shows how the tuition is planned to help you to get into print as soon as possible—how you can make extra income, *wherever you live.*

**Write today for this interesting booklet —without any obligation. By applying promptly you will have the opportunity of enrolling at very moderate fees.**

FREE CRITICISM. If you would like to have a free expert criticism send a short original MS. (a story or an article) to the Regent Institute. *Write your name and address in BLOCK capitals on the MS.*

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***Over 1,950 newspapers and periodicals have bought stories, articles, etc., from R.I. students —a record without parallel***

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